

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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March 25, 2025

Start: 1:46 p.m.

Recess: 4:23 p.m.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola

Kristy Marmorato

Sandy Nurse

Vickie Paladino

A P P E A R A N C E S

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

Lamar Wheeler, Senior Executive Director of  
Housing Support Services at the New York City  
Department of Veteran Services

Cassandra Alvarez, Chief-of-Staff at the New  
York City Department of Veteran Services

Ashton Stewart, member of the Veteran Advisory  
Board, Secretary of St. Albans Board of Visitors,  
and member of VFW Post 528

Brian Ellicott Cook, Director of Government  
Relations at SAGE

Peter Kempner, Legal Director at Volunteers of  
Legal Service

Alicia Kershaw, GallopNYC

Contessa Officer, Director of Veterans Program  
for VNS Health

Coco Culhane, Veteran Advocacy Project

Eric Lee, Director of Public Policy and  
Volunteers of America Greater New York

Michael Inyosu, self

Sharon Brown, Rose of Sharon Enterprises

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

Dr. Cleopatra Brown, Cold War and Chairperson of  
Community Board 16 Veterans Affairs Committee

Tyler Levsen, Staff Attorney and Legal Research  
Advisor at Family Legal Care

Christopher Leon Johnson, self

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: This is a microphone  
3 check for the Committee on Veterans. Today's date is  
4 March 25, 2025, located in the Committee Room.  
5 Recording is done by Janelle Yearwood.

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

9 At this time, we ask that you silence all  
10 electronic devices, and at no time are you to  
11 approach the dais.

12 If you have any questions throughout the  
13 hearing or would like to sign up for in-person  
14 testimony, please see one of the Sergeant-at-Arms.

15 Chair Holden, we're ready to go.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [GAVEL] Thank you,  
17 Sergeant, and good afternoon. Welcome to the  
18 Preliminary Budget hearing for the Committee on  
19 Veterans. My name is Robert Holden, the Chair of this  
20 Committee.

21 Today's Committee hearing is on the  
22 Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Budget and the 2025  
23 Preliminary Budget Report for the City's Department  
24 of Veterans Services, or DVS. I'd like to welcome  
25 Commissioner James Hendon of the Department of

2 Veterans Services to testify before this Committee.

3 Thank You, Commissioner, and sorry for the delay. I

4 would also like to acknowledge my fellow Council

5 Members who have joined us, Kristy Marmorato, Council

6 Member from the Bronx, and Queens Council Member

7 Vicki Paladino, and are we on remote? Okay, we're

8 waiting for other Committee Members, some of whom

9 will be on remote. The Fiscal 2026 budget for DVS

10 totals 5.9 million, including 4.2 million in personal

11 services funding to support 39 full-time positions

12 and 1.7 million in other-than-personal services. This

13 results in DVS's Fiscal 2026 budget being 1.1

14 million, or 16.1 percent, less than the current

15 budget for Fiscal 2025. A little bit more than half

16 of this difference is because the Fiscal 2025 budget

17 includes 575,000 for City Council discretionary

18 initiatives that are not yet budgeted for 2026.

19 Importantly, though, this Preliminary Plan did not

20 include any new needs, and there was only one notable

21 adjustment, which transferred 676,390 dollars from

22 the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in Fiscal

23 2025 for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support

24 Program. Notably, at approximately 5.9 million, the

25 Fiscal 2026 budget for DVS constitutes around 1/100,

2 or 0.001, percent of the City's total Fiscal 2026  
3 budget, making it one of the smallest, if not the  
4 smallest, City agencies. There are areas where the  
5 city's veterans lag behind the national average, and  
6 the City needs to step up and address this, and we've  
7 said this over and over again in this Committee.  
8 Compounding the yearly issues DVS faces with the  
9 minuscule budget we are seeing, the new federal  
10 administration has already made huge cuts to health  
11 programs, social services, and other veterans-  
12 specific programs. While federal funding does not  
13 directly fund the budget for DVS, federal programs do  
14 provide significant services and support programs to  
15 veterans residing in the city. It is clear the City  
16 Administration is not giving DVS enough of a budget  
17 to fill the gaps left by these federal cuts. Even  
18 before the federal cuts, you know, we needed more.  
19 So, I strongly feel that we owe it to our city's  
20 valued veteran community to do a better job at  
21 supporting their specific needs and that meets DVS's  
22 needs. DVS certainly needs adequate funding, which we  
23 haven't had ever so that I'd like to state, and I  
24 think everybody will agree with that, the budget that  
25 the Mayor's Office wants to allocate clearly reflects

2 its level of concern for our veteran community. What  
3 more tells the story than what you're allocating to  
4 DVS. The budget needs to provide more support and  
5 more services for our city's veterans, and it really  
6 needs to begin reinforcing itself to fill in gaps  
7 left by the federal administration. I look forward to  
8 discussing DVS's budget and operations, budget  
9 actions that were included in the Preliminary Plan,  
10 staffing at the agency, and the City's support  
11 services for veterans, and reviewing DVS's metrics  
12 reported in the Fiscal 2025 Preliminary Mayor's  
13 Management Report. I am particularly interested to  
14 hear how DVS is coming up with innovative ways to  
15 address the mental health, housing and security,  
16 employment, and social service needs for our  
17 veterans.

18               So, I'd like to thank both my Staff and  
19 the Committee Staff for their help in preparing for  
20 this hearing. Julia Haramis, the Unit Head; Regina  
21 Paul, to my right, the Policy Analyst; William  
22 Dougherty, my Legislative Director; and my Chief-of-  
23 Staff, Daniel Kurzyna.

24               I would like to remind everyone who  
25 wishes to testify in person today that you must fill

2 out an appearance card, which is located at the desk  
3 in the rear, the Sergeant-at-Arms near the entrance  
4 to this room. Please fill it out, even if you have  
5 already registered to testify in advance.

6 To allow as many people as possible to  
7 testify, public testimony will be limited to two  
8 minutes per person. I also ask my Colleagues to limit  
9 their questions and comments to five minutes. It's a  
10 very, very busy day, and we have a lot of people to  
11 testify, so if we can adhere to that.

12 Please note that witnesses who are here  
13 will testify before those on Zoom. That's a normal  
14 procedure of all Committees.

15 Now, in accordance with the rules of the  
16 Council, Regina Paul, our Policy Analyst, will  
17 administer the affirmation to the witnesses from DVS.  
18 Thank you.

19 POLICY ANALYST PAUL: Please raise your  
20 right hand.

21 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the  
22 whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your  
23 testimony before this Committee, and to respond  
24 honestly to Council Members' questions?

25 CHIEF-OF-STAFF ALVAREZ: I do.

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

3 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: I do.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Before I start, I  
5 just want to thank folks who are here. I know it's  
6 been a while as far as all who are here, especially  
7 those veteran community members who are here today.  
8 Thank you so much for being with us right now.

9 Good afternoon, Chair Holden, Members of  
10 the Veteran Committee, other Council Members, and  
11 members of New York City's veteran community who are  
12 in attendance. My name is James Hendon. I am honored  
13 to serve as Commissioner of the New York City  
14 Department of Veteran Services, DVS. Joining me for  
15 today's hearing are Cassandra Alvarez, our agency's  
16 Chief-of-Staff, and Lamar Wheeler, DVS' Senior  
17 Executive Director for Housing Support Services. We  
18 pray that today's testimony offers you insights into  
19 the role that DVS plays in New York City's veteran  
20 community, particularly as budget season approaches.  
21 Our objective is to give you as rich a viewpoint as  
22 possible from us as you factor in all stakeholders  
23 while charting an optimal path for those who have  
24 served in the U.S. Armed Forces, past and present,  
25 and their loved ones in New York City. By way of a

roadmap, we will discuss demographics, the history of the agency, how we're structured, our service and Charter-mandated areas, agency priorities, our SWOT analysis, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, recommendations for the Council from a discretionary funding standpoint, and our perspective on budget issues at DVS.

In starting with demographics, the 2023 ACS five-year estimate holds that 129,311 veterans live in New York City, 29 percent are African-American, 22.3 percent are Hispanic or Latino, 5.5 percent are Asian, 0.7 percent are American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1 percent are Pacific Islander. Approximately 41.2 percent of New York City's veterans are white. As is New York City, veterans are a majority-minority community here. Women comprise 10.2 percent of all New York City veterans in 2023. This is notable because the same data point 10 years ago, in 2015, put our female veteran population at 6.9 percent. Taking year over year from 2016 to 2023, our women veteran population has increased by an average of 0.8 percent per year. That's greater than the projected national growth rate for female veterans, according to the VA, of 0.3 percent per

2 year. In terms of age, approximately 29.3 percent of  
3 our population is younger than 55 years old, while  
4 70.7 percent is 55 or older. Our largest cohort is  
5 the 75 and older group, which comprise 31.8 percent  
6 of all New York City veterans.

7           Something not captured in the Census  
8 Bureau's data, according to the Department of  
9 Defense, approximately 200,000 service members  
10 transition from active duty service each year. Of  
11 that group, 10,000 transition to New York State. Out  
12 of those who transition to New York State, 5,000  
13 transition to New York City. Many transition here for  
14 school, using the post-9/11 GI Bill and Voc Rehab  
15 benefits. After obtaining their education, a majority  
16 of them do not stay. Recognizing that half of all  
17 veterans settle down in a place where they're not  
18 originally from, it's important to inspire these  
19 veterans to live, learn, and work in New York.

20           One other thing, the most important thing  
21 about the Census data, it significantly undercounts  
22 veterans. The Census Bureau defines a veteran as a  
23 person who served on active duty status at some point  
24 in their life and no longer serves. If you're  
25 currently serving in the military, active duty, Guard

2 or Reserve, and you live in New York City, you are  
3 not captured in Census data. I, a drilling U.S. Army  
4 Reservist, am not captured in Census Bureau data.  
5 Even more critically, if you're a veteran of the  
6 Guard or Reserve who never deployed on federal  
7 orders, Title 10 orders for the Guard, or being  
8 placed on orders that were not for drill or training  
9 in the Reserve, then you're not included in the  
10 Census Bureau's information, period. Roughly 40  
11 percent of all U.S. military service members are  
12 Guardsmen or Reservists. Many are not captured by the  
13 Census Bureau according to this definition.

14           Because the Census data is so flawed, as  
15 a starting point, when discussing the size of New  
16 York City's veteran community, we use the number of  
17 veterans that the VA estimates are eligible for VA  
18 healthcare in the five boroughs, 152,409, 1-5-2-4-0-  
19 9. This comes from the VA's FY23 Geographic  
20 Distribution of Veterans Expenditure Report. For the  
21 most part, VA healthcare eligibility is limited to  
22 honorably discharged veterans who've served for 24  
23 continuous months on active duty, or for Guardsmen or  
24 Reservists, those who've completed an entire federal  
25 non-training deployment. The VA data, too, does not

2 account for all veterans. That said, adding the  
3 number of active duty, Guardsmen and Reservists in  
4 New York City, 13,121 in FY23 per the Defense  
5 Department, to the number of veterans whom we believe  
6 are not eligible for VA healthcare brings us to an  
7 estimated size that is approximately 200,000. We  
8 cannot provide an exact number because X factors are  
9 how many Guard and Reserve veterans who have never  
10 deployed live in New York City, how many New York  
11 City veterans have a less than honorable discharge,  
12 also how many active duty veterans who have served  
13 for less than two years live in NYC.

14 New York City's definition of a veteran  
15 is the most permissive in the country. We recognize  
16 you as a veteran regardless of how long you've  
17 served, your component of service, Guard, Reserve,  
18 active duty, and your character of discharge. That  
19 said, ascertaining the size of our city's veteran  
20 community is difficult. All we know for certain is  
21 that the federal numbers are undercounts. I  
22 personally believe that New York City's veteran  
23 community is at least 230,000 members strong.

24 The Department of Veterans Services  
25 currently has contact information for approximately

2 190,000 New York City veterans out of a database  
3 containing 530,000 contacts. We had contact info for  
4 less than 5,000 New York City veterans in 2019. We  
5 have contact information for 190,000 now. We're  
6 actively working to get a handle on this issue and  
7 our people will recognize the policy implications.

8           Now to the history. The Department of  
9 Veterans Services was created through Local Law 113  
10 of 2015. Our official date of establishment is April  
11 8, 2016. Prior to being created, veteran community  
12 members protested outside of City Hall in 2014 and  
13 2015 clamoring for the creation of what we now know  
14 as DVS. The genesis for the complaints, veteran non-  
15 profits that received discretionary funding from the  
16 City Council wanted their own Veterans Services  
17 Department to coordinate with for the execution of  
18 their contracts. The veterans felt like contracting  
19 with larger agencies was impersonal and that the  
20 groups did not have a certain baked-in cultural  
21 competency to see and fully deal with the nuances of  
22 the military and veteran community. It took almost  
23 two years of protesting to reach a place where the  
24 City Council voted on Local Law 113 on November 10,  
25 2015, the day before Veterans Day. The Mayor at the

2 time signed the bill into law on December 10, 2015,  
3 one month later.

4           When the City made DVS, starting on April  
5 8, 2016, it took the five staff who worked for the  
6 then Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs and combined  
7 them with eight staff who worked exclusively on  
8 veteran housing issues at the Department of Homeless  
9 Services, DHS. Key things about the agency when it  
10 was created. DVS didn't have its own administrative  
11 back end at the time. We were dependent on the  
12 Department of Citywide Administrative Services, DCAS.  
13 The housing group that originally came from DHS,  
14 worked in a silo. It continued to focus on addressing  
15 veteran homelessness like a laser. It did not  
16 integrate into other aspects of the agency at the  
17 time. As an aside, the veteran homeless population in  
18 New York City has decreased from 4,677 in 2011 to 624  
19 in 2024, a greater than 85 percent decline. This is  
20 largely attributed to the leadership of the DVS  
21 housing team and the other continuum of care  
22 partners. We thank all of them for their work.

23           The rest of DVS was focused on being a  
24 referral agency, not a direct services agency. The  
25 center of gravity for the Core 4 Whole Health Model,

2 our agency strategy from 2016 to 2019, was referring  
3 veterans to groups that focused on culture,  
4 connection, community, and clinical care. For  
5 perspective, 61 out of the 62 counties in New York  
6 State has a county veteran service office. In the  
7 case of New York City, which covers five counties, we  
8 have DVS. We were the only such entity that did not  
9 help veterans submit VA claims. Many consider filing  
10 VA claims to be a foundation of veteran service.  
11 Things changed for us in late 2019. DVS began a  
12 shift, starting with my time here to focus on direct  
13 services. Technology, which is masterful in helping  
14 to facilitate referrals and optimize performance in  
15 general, is great. However, the bedrock of any  
16 government services organization is its ability to  
17 provide core services. Technology enhances those  
18 things. It does not come before them. That was a key  
19 difference in the philosophical shift at DVS. Other  
20 changes or evolutions, this is not everything, just a  
21 handful of them, include the housing team, while  
22 maintaining its integrity, became integrated with the  
23 rest of the agency. We transitioned away from DCAS  
24 support model to one where DVS now maintains all of  
25 its internal administrative functions. We developed a

2 VA claims unit to help the veteran community members  
3 file VA claims, and we have evolved our procurement  
4 capacity significantly, such that we're processing a  
5 growing number of veteran-oriented City Council  
6 discretionary contracts and contracting opportunities  
7 tied to State funding. In all that we do, DVS triages  
8 issues in the veteran community where there is acute  
9 need and we can provide unique value. We do what we  
10 can to deliver that value while optimizing the  
11 partners and resources available and being mindful of  
12 our mandates in the City Charter.

13           The structure, speaking of the City  
14 Charter, our Charter-mandated task, according to  
15 Chapter 75, Section 3102 of the New York City  
16 Charter, is to assist and inform veteran and military  
17 families in the areas of housing, healthcare,  
18 benefits, culture, education, and employment. I think  
19 of our work through multiple prisms, so I'm going to  
20 speak to how we are arrayed in terms of those  
21 contexts.

22           When you exclude the headquarters, think  
23 of DVS as two sides of a coin. One side involves  
24 internal operations of our agency. The other side  
25 deals with veteran services, the client-facing

2 component. The 39 positions authorized for DVS, 34 of  
3 those slots are currently filled. We're on track to  
4 fill four more slots in April and May. We thank OMB  
5 for those approvals. The fate of the 39th slot, which  
6 was vacated last week by someone who was on protected  
7 leave, it hadn't been used recently prior to becoming  
8 available, is internally being discussed. We're  
9 optimistic about it being filled. Our goal is to  
10 reach 100 percent strength this Calendar Year. Out of  
11 the 34 people who are currently assigned to DVS, four  
12 are in headquarters, 20 fall on the services side of  
13 the coin, and 10 fall on the operations side.

14 Internal operations consists of the  
15 following functions: technology, which includes IT,  
16 data analytics, tech support, and cybersecurity;  
17 fiscal operations, which includes budgeting,  
18 procurement, the processing of payments and technical  
19 assistance, logistics, payroll and timekeeping, human  
20 resources, equal employment opportunity, and legal  
21 slash compliance. There are 10 people in internal  
22 operations. Many of those people perform multiple  
23 roles in order to account for the various functions  
24 and to ensure that we have depth and redundancy when  
25 necessary.

2           The services side, or 20 employees,  
3 breaks down such that each Charter-mandated area is  
4 accounted for. Services can be seen through the  
5 lenses of four functions: direct services, referrals,  
6 synergies, and communications.

7           Our direct services are housing, which  
8 employs seven DVS team members; VA claims, which  
9 employs six team members; and indigent burials, which  
10 employs one part-time member who does not count  
11 against DVS's headcount. This is the only person who  
12 serves as an ancillary staff member in this way. This  
13 is courtesy of NYC Aging's Silver Star program. We  
14 thank NYC Aging for its partnership.

15           All in our agency are able to make  
16 referrals, and most often do. That said, the referral  
17 coordination process is led by one member of our  
18 agency, our Executive Director for Mental Health and  
19 Care Coordination. One team member has overall  
20 responsibility for referrals.

21           The synergies unit, those who can  
22 coordinate with partners, enabling DVS to deliver  
23 offerings where the whole is greater than sum of its  
24 parts, making one plus one equals three, has four  
25 team members.

2           Communications, which has two team  
3 members, works lockstep with our direct services,  
4 synergies, and referrals arms to amplify our  
5 offerings and tell the DVS story.

6           Now to Charter-mandated areas. By Charter  
7 area, our housing team covers housing; our claims  
8 team and burials coordinator cover benefits; our  
9 synergies team covers education, employment, and  
10 culture; and all teams directly and indirectly cover  
11 health. Housing and claims approach health through  
12 the lens of lack of access to VA healthcare.  
13 Synergies and referrals approach health through the  
14 context of mental health, wellness, and food  
15 insecurity.

16           When one looks at our agency's  
17 performance in the Charter-mandated areas, things  
18 done by our services team, as undergirded by internal  
19 operations, much of our work by Charter area follows  
20 the healthcare, Veterans Mental Health Coalition,  
21 Veteran Feeding Program, Get Covered NYC Vet, and  
22 Mission Vet Check. Details can be found at  
23 [nyc.gov/vethealth](http://nyc.gov/vethealth), [nyc.gov/vetfood](http://nyc.gov/vetfood),  
24 [nyc.gov/coverednyc](http://nyc.gov/coverednyc), and [nyc.gov/vetcheck](http://nyc.gov/vetcheck).

2 For housing, helping veterans take a step  
3 up wherever they are on the housing ladder from  
4 emergency housing, supportive housing, to affordable  
5 housing, to homeownership. More information is  
6 available at [nyc.gov/vethousing](http://nyc.gov/vethousing) and [nyc.gov/vet](http://nyc.gov/vet)  
7 ladder.

8 For benefits, VA claims support, indigent  
9 burial support, and recurring veteran and military  
10 family summits. Details can be found at  
11 [nyc.gov/vetclaims](http://nyc.gov/vetclaims), [nyc.gov/vetburials](http://nyc.gov/vetburials), and  
12 [nyc.gov/vetsummit](http://nyc.gov/vetsummit). Please note the next veteran  
13 military family summit will be held at Citi Field on  
14 Saturday, May 3rd. There will be an emphasis on  
15 employment, housing, mental health, and access to VA  
16 services.

17 For education, it's our Veterans on  
18 Campus Network, which is in partnership with City-  
19 based institutions of higher learning. The Military  
20 Family Advocate Program, also known as MFA, in  
21 partnership with NYC Schools. Junior Reserve Officer  
22 Training Corps, also in partnership with NYC Schools.  
23 Most details can be found online at  
24 [nyc.gov/vetstudents](http://nyc.gov/vetstudents), [nyc.gov/vetparents](http://nyc.gov/vetparents), and  
25 [nyc.gov/vetmfa](http://nyc.gov/vetmfa).

2           Employment, please note that employment  
3 includes entrepreneurship, includes the Veteran  
4 Business Leadership Association, VBLA, VetBizMap,  
5 Veteran Street Vendor Liaison Support, Edge for Vets,  
6 and VetJobs. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vbla](http://nyc.gov/vbla),  
7 [nyc.gov/vetvendor](http://nyc.gov/vetvendor), [nyc.gov/vetbizmap](http://nyc.gov/vetbizmap),  
8 [nyc.gov/vetbusiness](http://nyc.gov/vetbusiness), and [nyc.gov/vetjobs](http://nyc.gov/vetjobs).

9           Culture. Culture breaks into two  
10 categories, one-time efforts and enduring activities.  
11 Examples of one-time efforts include, but are not  
12 limited to, erecting a memorial honoring New York  
13 City's post-9/11 war veterans and their loved ones.  
14 Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vetmemorial](http://nyc.gov/vetmemorial). Another  
15 example is ensuring that VA memorial markers are  
16 erected for all 36 New York City Vietnam War veterans  
17 who are still missing into action and unaccounted  
18 for.

19           Enduring cultural activities include Our  
20 Veterans NYC, a veteran community calendar maintained  
21 by the Bob Woodruff Foundation in partnership with  
22 DVS. The website is [ourveterans.nyc](http://ourveterans.nyc). Recurring New  
23 York City veteran community commemorations and  
24 activities, the Veteran Voices Project, and the City  
25 of New York's administration of the Private First

2 Class Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program.  
3 Details are available at [nyc.gov slash vet voices](https://nyc.gov/vet-voices),  
4 and [nyc.gov/vetdwyer](https://nyc.gov/vetdwyer). Also, there's [ourveterans.nyc](https://ourveterans.nyc.org).

5           Priorities. Priorities for the agency in  
6 order are data, transitioning service members,  
7 housing, claims, and culture. Say it again, data,  
8 transitioning service members, housing, claims, and  
9 culture. We do not list mental health as a separate  
10 priority because it undergirds all that we do.

11           Data. The goal regarding data about New  
12 York City's veteran community, particularly veteran  
13 contact information, is to get it, clean it, and  
14 share it with governmental entities with whom we can  
15 legally and ethically partner. Examples include the  
16 New York City Council, New York State Department of  
17 Veterans Services, and the VA. If all of us are doing  
18 our part to engage New York City veterans, then more  
19 of our brothers and sisters will come into the light.  
20 We're in a situation where from an outreach  
21 standpoint, more touches are always better than less.  
22 Also, to be clear, the most recently available VA  
23 information holds that as of FY23, 34.3 percent of  
24 all veterans self-identify in the United States, 29.8  
25 percent self-identify in New York State, and 24.1

2 percent self-identify in New York City. Identifying  
3 our people so that we can love them through our  
4 services is the most critical thing that we do.

5           Transitioning service members. Our goal  
6 for transitioning service members is to identify  
7 them, attract them to New York City and the City's  
8 opportunities and benefits for veterans in general,  
9 and serve them. Thanks to years of work and  
10 partnership with the State Directors of Veterans  
11 Affairs nationwide, DVS now receives DD214  
12 information for veterans transitioning to New York  
13 City. As soon as the separation document is cut, we  
14 get it electronically. Also, as of last autumn, we  
15 are notified once an active duty service member  
16 formally tells the military that they intend to end  
17 their active duty service and transition to New York.  
18 We know that a future veteran is inbound to us up to  
19 18 months before their active duty service ends. It  
20 is vital to make sure these people do not fall  
21 through the cracks and become untethered to veteran  
22 services, much like what happened to many who came  
23 before them. This is our second priority.

24           Housing. Perennially, DVS is strong in  
25 its support of two out of four rungs of the housing

2 ladder. Emergency housing, those facing homelessness  
3 and in the shelter system, and supportive housing,  
4 those in need of additional support in the path to  
5 independent living. While maintaining what we do in  
6 emergency and supportive, we are working to become  
7 stronger in the upper rungs of the ladder, affordable  
8 housing and homeownership. In light of the economic  
9 uncertainty and the 1.4 percent vacancy rate in New  
10 York City, we seek to become stable ground for  
11 veterans looking for counseling and navigator  
12 services specifically in these endeavors. There  
13 exists no one-stop shop that can listen to a  
14 veteran's affordable housing and homeownership needs  
15 and then advise them on veteran-specific city, state,  
16 federal, public, private, and non-profit options.  
17 This is an example of DVS in a synergistic one-plus-  
18 one-equals-three way closing the gap.

19           Claims. Another gap to close, the  
20 service-connected disability rate is 31.2 percent  
21 nationwide according to 2023 census data. The rate  
22 falls to 21.6 percent in New York State and 20.1  
23 percent in New York City. Taken conservatively, using  
24 census population data that we know is severely  
25 depressed, that suggests that at least 14,354 New

2 York City veterans would receive a service-connected  
3 disability rating from the VA if they applied for  
4 one. This would raise the proportion of New York City  
5 veterans with disability ratings to the national  
6 average. Our goals here are to increase the number of  
7 accredited service officers in New York City who are  
8 able to submit VA claims, inform the public about  
9 available, high-quality, free VA claim support, and  
10 help ensure that accredited service officers in the  
11 five boroughs file claims at a steady pace. We'd like  
12 to take this time to thank the Council for supporting  
13 the Veterans Resource Center Initiative, which uses a  
14 congressionally chartered veteran service  
15 organization to ensure that VA claim support is  
16 offered out of each Council Members' District office  
17 at a cadence of one day per month starting no later  
18 than FY26.

19 Culture. Our fifth priority is culture  
20 insofar as we hope to amplify, support, and when  
21 possible, seed events that bring together our veteran  
22 and military family community. There's several things  
23 here, as mentioned before, enduring community events,  
24 the memorial of the post-9/11 war veterans and their  
25 loved ones, and honoring New York City's Vietnam

2 veterans who are missing in action come to mind. One  
3 culture-supporting initiative that I'd like to focus  
4 on, for the Joseph P. Dwyer program, where the State  
5 confers money annually to promote activities that  
6 normalize help-seeking behavior among veteran and  
7 military families. DVS, along with all other counties  
8 in New York, is a Dwyer program recipient. We now  
9 receive more than 400,000 dollars per year in Dwyer  
10 funds. It took time to put this together, but we are  
11 the only recipient that is doing something as dynamic  
12 as what we do. While operating within all contracting  
13 and procurement protocol board guidelines, we  
14 effectively employ the Dwyer resources in a way that  
15 parallels the administration of a grant. The deadline  
16 for the first Dwyer program applications post-pilot  
17 stage was in December. An evaluation Committee  
18 representative of various demographics within our  
19 community was convened. We're in the process of  
20 administering Dwyer funding to winning organizations  
21 at this time. In total, 30 NYC Dwyer organizations  
22 will receive funding for 31 projects. One group  
23 applied for two different things. We're excited to  
24 watch this process unfold. The current NYC Dwyer  
25 awardees are recipients of funding in FY25 and FY26.

2 The opportunity to apply for NYC Dwyer funding will  
3 open every two years. The next window for Dwyer  
4 applications will be during Calendar Year '26 in  
5 advance of the funding to be remitted during Fiscal  
6 Years '27 and '28.

7 Now to the SWOT analysis. Strengths for  
8 DVS are we're able to connect veterans to a robust  
9 array of services and offerings. DVS has a strong  
10 grasp of the veterans in New York City, of who they  
11 are, down to the name, address, and contact  
12 information level. Our awareness in this space is  
13 growing. We leverage our brand and the imprimatur of  
14 government to inspire partners and be inspired by  
15 them to collaborate and deliberate needed synergies.  
16 We have access to housing choice vouchers that are  
17 specifically for veterans who are not eligible for VA  
18 healthcare, speaking of the HUD-VASH collaborative  
19 case management voucher.

20 Weaknesses. We're still a young and  
21 growing organization. For many things that we do  
22 internally and externally, we're establishing  
23 precedents by doing what has never been done before  
24 at DVS. It takes time, learned experience, and sweat  
25 equity to come up the learning curve. The evolution

of the agency has moved slower than planned due to the city's economic backdrop. I'm speaking of headwinds presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the migrant crisis. Five of the Department's eight years of existence, the most recent five, have been impacted by this challenge. The rollout of our new technology platform to undergird VetConnectNYC, DVS' digital referral portal, was delayed. The reason, additional time needed to be taken to configure our new portal to meet the requirements of Local Law 37. In essence, Local Law 37 requires City agencies to ask a veteran identifier question on client-facing forms. The quantitative aspect of those responses, how many veteran community members responded to agency X or department Y, are to then be reported, broken down by City Council District. No one, on the Speaker side or the Mayor's side, has technology that is able to take a group of addresses in bulk and tell you, for all those addresses, which City Council District each respondent lives in. Absent having someone on our team do this individually for each of the thousands of Local Law 37 respondents, we took the approach of adding this application to VetConnectNYC. It helps us

2 accurately and efficiently track this data point.  
3 This has led to a delay in the rollout of the new  
4 platform that undergirds VetConnectNYC. Nonetheless,  
5 the work still goes on. VetConnectNYC, as an effort,  
6 is fully functional. It always has been. The new  
7 technology component that bolsters it will be  
8 integrated this spring. Visit [nyc.gov/vetconnect](http://nyc.gov/vetconnect) to  
9 learn more.

10 To opportunities. The penetration that  
11 DVS has made regarding data represents an  
12 opportunity. I'm speaking to data tied to Local Law  
13 37, data sharing agreements with the New York State  
14 Department of Veterans Services and Department of  
15 Defense, asking partner organizations to ask a  
16 veteran identifier question voluntarily, not through  
17 law, and using VA veteran identifier tools such as VA  
18 Squares. The increase in women veteran population in  
19 New York City, at a rate faster than the national  
20 projected rise in female veterans, is a favorable  
21 occurrence. The Dwyer program and resources that we  
22 are just now starting to inject within the veteran  
23 community offers a powerful lifeline of support.  
24 Also, we have the New York State Service Disabled  
25 Veteran Owned Business Program, and our agency's role

2 as a promoter and ambassador of it provides swift  
3 economic opportunities for large numbers of service-  
4 disabled veterans who may soon be unemployed given  
5 the current federal work backdrop.

6           Threats. New York City's veteran  
7 community is aging. We need to accommodate our older  
8 veterans accordingly. To reiterate, 70.7 percent of  
9 New York City's veterans are aged 55 or older. 17.5  
10 percent are between the ages of 55 and 64; 21.5  
11 percent are between the ages of 65 and 74; 31.8  
12 percent are aged 75 or older. The veteran community,  
13 like all in New York City, face availability and  
14 price constraints when it comes to housing. It is  
15 incumbent on DVS to be as connected, knowledgeable,  
16 and helpful as possible when assisting and informing  
17 our community members on housing related issues. If  
18 the federal government continues the massive  
19 reduction in force that is currently planned, then  
20 we'll see more New York City veterans thrown into  
21 financial insecurity. This is economic and housing  
22 ramifications. Add to that, on one hand, we'll see an  
23 increase in the number of veterans who engage the VA  
24 for support, those who are unemployed. At the same  
25 time, the VA will be less effective at responding to

2 those veterans, recognizing that approximately 20  
3 percent of its staff, more than 80,000 people, will  
4 have been terminated. It is important to note that 1  
5 out of 10 working-age veterans is employed by the  
6 federal government. 30 percent of the federal  
7 workforce is comprised of U.S. military veterans.  
8 Separately, 20 percent of all U.S. employees works  
9 for a firm that is a federal contractor. Veterans who  
10 are direct federal employees and those affiliated  
11 with contractors will be affected.

12 We fear that the VA will use an upcoming  
13 review of its medical infrastructure assets to close  
14 the VA hospitals in Manhattan and Brooklyn, along  
15 with a community-based outpatient clinic on Staten  
16 Island. This process, which occurs once every four  
17 years and is known as the Asset Infrastructure Review  
18 Commission, will resume again in the spring of 2026.  
19 AIR Commission recommendations are made based on the  
20 number of veterans in a community who self-identify  
21 and use their local VA healthcare facilities. This is  
22 another reason why New York City veterans' self-  
23 identification is key.

24 Council budget recommendations. Items  
25 that we would encourage the Council to consider this

2 budget season follow. I'm speaking only about  
3 discretionary awards. These are gaps where we believe  
4 that non-profits can fill a void in the veteran  
5 ecosystem. Further, these are areas that have not  
6 been funded by the Council, to our knowledge, in the  
7 past. Non-profits that support, train, and assist  
8 mentors and veteran treatment courts. Food insecurity  
9 specific to veterans. Small business counseling and  
10 networking that is tailored towards veteran street  
11 vendors. Pre-homeownership counseling specific to  
12 veterans and organizations that support veteran and  
13 military families whose children attend public  
14 school.

15 DVS' budget focused. For DVS, specific to  
16 budget season, a focus for us is to strive to reduce  
17 our vacancy rate to less than 3 percent. This  
18 involves the new hires I mentioned that we will make  
19 in the coming weeks. A less than 3 percent vacancy  
20 rate translates into 38 out of 39 DVS positions  
21 filled. My dream is to get us 100 percent as we work  
22 internally on steps needed to fill that 39th spot.

23 Another thing that we are mindful of this  
24 budget season is increasing the number of  
25 discretionary awards that we process. Our goal is to

2 action all Council discretionary awards valued at  
3 20,000 dollars or less, no later than FY28. We are  
4 focusing on the 20,000 dollars or less awards, the  
5 small dollar awards, because they speak directly to  
6 the needs of our community.

7 Thinking back to the creation of DVS, why  
8 veteran community members originally protested.  
9 Smaller non-profits that won these types of awards  
10 were the ones that experienced difficulty in dealing  
11 with larger, non-veteran specific agencies like the  
12 Department for Youth and Community Development, the  
13 Department for the Aging, the Department of Health  
14 and Mental Hygiene, and the Department of Social  
15 Services. We've seen five discretionary awards during  
16 FY25 as a pilot to learn the nuances of this work.  
17 We're optimistic about increasing the number of  
18 awards gradually as each year goes by.

19 For perspective, the median number of  
20 small dollar Council discretionary awards conferred  
21 each year from FY2016 through FY2025 was 28. The  
22 median aggregate value of those awards in a given  
23 year was approximately 206,000 dollars. So 28 awards,  
24 206,000 dollars per year on average.

2           In conclusion, we're doing everything  
3 that we can in what are ever-changing and complicated  
4 times to identify and deliver resources to our  
5 veterans and their loved ones. The mission of this  
6 agency begins with the words connect, mobilize, and  
7 empower New York City's veteran community. Our  
8 strategy can be summarized by the words connect,  
9 mobilize, and empower. Connect is to identify our  
10 veterans and know who they are. Mobilize is to have  
11 the veterans recognize us and know who we are and  
12 what we deliver. Empower is the act of serving them.  
13 As the smallest Department in New York City  
14 government, I always tell people that there are 39  
15 people authorized for DVS. The next largest agency  
16 has an authorized strength of 136. The largest has an  
17 authorized strength of 48,876. We've spent ample time  
18 building our offerings, putting together our team,  
19 and getting the connect portion of our work right. As  
20 this solidifies, you will soon see a large portion of  
21 our efforts touch mobilization. Pay special attention  
22 when we begin sharing veteran contact information at  
23 the District level with you as City Council Members  
24 starting this spring. We will amplify messages,  
25 tailored borough-wide and city-wide, together.

2 Touches will increase, and people will come into the  
3 light. Once mobilization or veterans learning about  
4 us has been optimized, we will witness a strong turn  
5 in veteran services as we help all our brothers and  
6 sisters and their loved ones. We will empower them.  
7 This is the plan. There have been several ups and  
8 downs and back and forths in this fight, but we're  
9 here and all of us for the most part, including you,  
10 are ready. Things are not going to be perfect.  
11 However, we will achieve the vision of those veterans  
12 who protested outside of City Hall more than a decade  
13 ago. We will achieve the vision of the entire veteran  
14 community. Veterans and their loved ones wanted a  
15 department in New York City government that would be  
16 there for them and do right by them. We thank the  
17 Council for enabling us to be here and do these  
18 things.

19           Lastly, recognizing that DVS is eight,  
20 going on nine years old. So many people, myself  
21 included, wishes we could have snapped a finger to be  
22 where we are. The last new department prior to DVS  
23 was created more than two decades before us. This  
24 took trial and error. It took changes in leadership  
25 at all levels, internal and external, and it took

2 partners to help us identify where the services in  
3 gaps were. Thank you to all partners. Most  
4 importantly, it took patience and understanding.  
5 Thank you to the veteran community for being patient  
6 with us. We're building a foundation, offerings, and  
7 systems that will ideally stand the test of time. If  
8 you need us, then know that the New York City  
9 Department of Veterans Services can be reached at  
10 [nyc.gov/vets](http://nyc.gov/vets), 212-416-5250, [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov),  
11 and using the social media handle at NYCvets. Once  
12 again, it's [nyc.gov/vets](http://nyc.gov/vets), 212-416-5250,  
13 [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov), and using the social media  
14 handle at NYCvets. Please subscribe to our newsletter  
15 at [nyc.gov/vetnewsletter](http://nyc.gov/vetnewsletter) in order to learn more about  
16 our Women Veterans Empowerment Luncheon on Wednesday,  
17 April 2nd, the Edge for Vets Spring Career Workshop  
18 on Tuesday, April 15th, and the METS Military and  
19 Family Summit on Saturday, May 3rd. Thank you.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow. Thank you,  
21 Commissioner. That's 11 pages in record time. I just  
22 want to, again, thank you for your complete  
23 testimony.

24

25

2 We've been joined by Council Member  
3 Nurse, Member of the Committee, and remotely Council  
4 Member Ariola.

5 So, I just want to go over a few things,  
6 and it's kind of like a vicious cycle, Commissioner,  
7 that, you know, we don't get enough funding and, you  
8 know, we don't make any progress on self-  
9 identification. Have we made any progress under your  
10 reign as the Commissioner to self-identify? Because  
11 it's hard to do when you just get the same budget  
12 year in and year out and we try to address it because  
13 I believe if we get, you know, 30,000 more veterans  
14 to self-identify, they would in turn get more  
15 resources from the federal government and then would  
16 spend that money in New York City so the economy  
17 would benefit. So would our veterans. So it would  
18 seem that the City, you know, could invest in DVS  
19 just to, you know, contact more veterans to get them  
20 to self-identify, but you can't even contact them.  
21 It's almost impossible with that budget that you  
22 have. So, a little investment, and we've been talking  
23 about this for a while on this Committee, it would  
24 seem the Mayor would actually want to do this and  
25 give us a few more million for DVS to be able to

2 contact veterans to get them to self-identify. I  
3 mean, have you made any progress in that area?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: You know, I  
5 appreciate just the concern of just putting it on the  
6 table, Mr. Chair. You know, as you always say, we can  
7 always do more with more, to call that out. For me,  
8 it's been the focus on let's get our house in order  
9 so we can fill the vacancies we currently have. So,  
10 we're really excited about getting to 38 out of 39,  
11 hopefully getting to 39 out of 39 soon. And it's,  
12 different things I'll say to this. One is, looking at  
13 our numbers, you've seen more penetration. You know,  
14 look at the veterans and their families served by  
15 DVS, went from just over 1,000 in FY22, just over  
16 3,000 in FY23, just over 10,000 in FY24, so we're  
17 starting to get out there more. Strategically, a lot  
18 of our work has been focusing like a laser on knowing  
19 who more of our people are. So, step one, let's know  
20 who these people are. So, we're so happy to go from  
21 less than 5,000 veterans that we know to roughly  
22 190,000 and so, for us, it's knowing who more of  
23 these folks are. The other step is going to be  
24 sharing information with you as far as all the  
25 Council Members. If all of us are reaching out

2 between you, us, and our other elected officials, the  
3 number of touches will necessitate more people coming  
4 to the light. Because just because you know who  
5 someone are, just like everyone here, you know who  
6 the people are in your District in theory. That's not  
7 the same thing as getting as many of them to animate.  
8 Those are two different stories. And so for us, step  
9 one has been let's figure out who the people are of  
10 the 8.3 million New Yorkers. Let's find what we  
11 believe to be 200,000-plus who are in this city. And  
12 then let's work together, all of us, to continue to  
13 ping these folks in the hopes that more of them come  
14 into the light. Like we can't force self-  
15 identification. That's the issue.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, you know in the  
17 Preliminary Plan, DVS' Fiscal 2025 budget totals 7  
18 million, including other-than-personal services  
19 funding of 2.9 and 4.1 million for personal services,  
20 funding to support 39 budgeted full-time, like you  
21 had mentioned, positions. The Fiscal 2025 budget  
22 includes 575,000 for City Council discretionary  
23 initiatives that are not yet budgeted for Fiscal Year  
24 2026 or beyond. DVS' Preliminary Plan did not include  
25 any new needs. Did DVS request any new needs from OMB

2 in advance of the Preliminary Plan? And if so, what  
3 were they? If not, why not?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, Mr. Chair, we've  
5 got internal discussions with OMB on that. That's  
6 what I can say is that we have internal discussions  
7 with them. We all see what's going on right here out  
8 now as far as that we always can do more with more  
9 and what the current climate is internal to the city  
10 and what's happening on the federal side, so the most  
11 I can say on this is that we're in internal  
12 conversations with our friends at OMB at this time.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are they friends?  
14 Because I don't think they're friends because again,  
15 if we're not getting any progress, if we're not even  
16 asking, you're not even telling us what new needs you  
17 would be able to address. Certainly, we're way below  
18 the national average on disability claims for our  
19 veterans. What is it, 11, 12 percent below that?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This one was 20.1  
21 percent in New York City, but it's 31.2 percent  
22 nationally. That was that number.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So yeah, so we're  
24 lagging behind. And that alone, if we address that,  
25 if we've got a few more million to communicate with

2 our 190,000 veterans that you say it's probably  
3 closer to 230,000, right?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I believe, yeah, I  
5 believe number to be, I believe the number is greater  
6 than 230,000.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, we're not even  
8 locating the 40,000 that won't self-identify, and  
9 we're lagging behind in all the categories in New  
10 York City of our veterans receiving services, self-  
11 identifying, disability. A little investment would go  
12 a long way. And if we can't, I know, you know, you're  
13 stuck between a rock and a hard place. I know OMB is  
14 holding all the cards and they can just say, you get  
15 the same thing and you're lucky you're getting the  
16 same amount of money. But really, it shouldn't be up  
17 to the Council. It should be the Mayor that steps in  
18 and says, you know what, we have to do a little bit  
19 more investment, but I'd like to hear what new needs  
20 that you, let's just play, you know, sort of, I don't  
21 want to put you on the spot because I think you do  
22 good work and you're doing a lot with very little,  
23 but we're not going to make any progress in reaching  
24 our veterans that need services if we don't increase  
25 the budget, at least to communicate with them. If we

2 can't get that, then shame on us. And I'd just like  
3 to say, what would you do with a few more million to,  
4 at least that was budgeted for mailings, let's say.  
5 Let's just do something very basic.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, first of all,  
7 I want to, I guess the, and I'll answer it, but I  
8 just want to say this.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you can't tell us  
10 what you're doing (CROSS-TALK)

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Like I said, it's,  
12 you know, the most I can say is that certain  
13 conversations are internal on the OMB side. I'll say  
14 that. The other piece is, you know, we can always do  
15 more with more. And then the other one, as far as,  
16 you know, for us when it comes to priorities, when we  
17 look at areas where we, you know, could envision  
18 growing, employment is one to call that out. Because  
19 if we look at the current backdrop where we see more  
20 veterans who may need help with employment and  
21 entrepreneurship support if they wind up not having  
22 jobs. Another area for us is VA claims as far as  
23 having more veterans who are able to apply for VA  
24 claims to kind of, there's so many people who have  
25 damage that's been done to their brains and bodies

2 who can receive the service-connected disability  
3 compensation as an example so connecting that.  
4 Another one is the housing front to continue to be  
5 right with our people in housing, which is a core  
6 issue that affects all New Yorkers. And then the  
7 other piece is burials. Given that we do have an  
8 aging population that we are stronger as far as being  
9 there for families in those times when they have a  
10 loved one who is a veteran who passes away. So those  
11 are areas where, you know, if the genie came today  
12 and said, hey, you know, Christmas came early, it  
13 would be employment, it'd be claims, it'd be housing,  
14 it'd be burials, Mr. Chair. But to be clear for us,  
15 any discussions about these things are all internal  
16 at this time, but thank you so much for the concern.  
17 We understand, and it means a lot.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you did ask... you  
19 can't tell us what the new needs other than what you  
20 had mentioned, but OMB is not listening. Because I  
21 don't expect, I'm hopeful that we'll get more money,  
22 but I don't expect it because we never got it. We  
23 haven't received it yet, and I don't know how long.  
24 This is it for me, by the way, so I would hope that  
25 finally we can get money.

2                   COMMISSIONER HENDON: I've got to say, to  
3 me, I think the glass is half full in that we are  
4 really excited about getting to a place where we will  
5 be a less than 3 percent vacancy rate and getting to  
6 ideally 0 percent vacancy rate. That's a big deal.  
7 I've got to credit our people at OMB for that  
8 happening. You don't hear that from agencies often  
9 saying, I have a less than 3 percent vacancy rate and  
10 soon I will be at a 0 percent vacancy rate. So, as  
11 far as within the context what we have, we appreciate  
12 that. Also I want to acknowledge that, you know, we  
13 did not have any Program to Eliminate the Gap  
14 measures taken with us this past Fiscal Year, so  
15 that's something else I want to acknowledge our folks  
16 at OMB as far as things that the glass is half full  
17 here, and we appreciate what we've got so we can go  
18 out and grind.

19                   CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but isn't that  
20 sad though, that we're lagging behind. There's a  
21 need. When in any other population, if there's a need  
22 for additional resources, the City has been pretty  
23 good in coming forth, but who's more important than  
24 our veterans? Who's more deserving, let's put it that  
25 way, than our veterans? So that's why we're going to

2 directly appeal to the Mayor, and we're going to, you  
3 know, this Committee will, and we have been, but  
4 we're going to continue to put the pressure on.

5 But I just want to recognize my  
6 Colleague, Council Member Paladino.

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: May I just say  
8 something really quick if it's okay? Something you  
9 said just got me thinking. I want to put this out  
10 there. If you look at this in the longer arc, not  
11 just today, but looking at this as an agency that's  
12 eight years old, about to be nine years old, we've  
13 been working to build the framework of this thing, so  
14 that as time goes by, and you get flesh, and you get  
15 more meat on it, that it will be ready, and so a lot  
16 of our work these past few years has been getting us  
17 in a place so that structurally, whenever certain  
18 needs do come, we're ready to take them on. Like I'm  
19 so excited that, you know, we are ready for certain  
20 things that involve employment, that involve housing,  
21 that involve claims, that involve burials, because we  
22 built out the systems and the architecture to be able  
23 to do these things, and so I just want to put that  
24 out there too.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I recognize my  
3 Colleague, Council Member Paladino.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Hello. How's  
5 everybody? Good.

6 Here we are again, and we're begging for  
7 money again. As my Colleague and Chairman has said,  
8 you know, it's a vicious cycle. Here we go, around  
9 and around and around. Now with all the housing  
10 that's being built, the affordable housing that's  
11 coming up, and we've talked about, you know, the  
12 veterans housing crisis and all of it. I want to  
13 know, has anybody approached you concerning the  
14 affordable housing and the different complexes that  
15 are going to be going up throughout the city to make  
16 way for our vets so they have a nice place to live?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for the  
18 question, Madam Council Member, and I'll say a little  
19 bit and ask Lamar too. It's a two-way street where we  
20 go on offense and defense with this, as far as making  
21 it clear as best we can, working with our partners  
22 over at NYCHA, over at HPD, and even the VA, that we  
23 can get the word out that folks know look, if you are  
24 looking at developing something, you're looking at  
25 building units for veterans, please reach out and we

2 can help talk with you about project basing the VASH  
3 vouchers, the VASH continuum vouchers. That's us  
4 going on offense. Us on defense is being fortunate to  
5 have folks who do come and who are inbounds with  
6 these requests, so we can tell them exactly where to  
7 go to look at these things, and we always tell folks  
8 too, we had our HPD made an alias for this,  
9 [nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp](http://nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp). Two to four times per  
10 year, Housing Preservation and Development makes an  
11 RFP available for those looking to obtain vouchers  
12 for support. We tell folks go to  
13 [nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp](http://nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp), fill that out, and  
14 indicate in your application that you would like to  
15 build units as far as veterans housing. So, this is  
16 something where we've been very aggressive in trying  
17 to get the word out and receiving folks when they  
18 come. We assist and inform all stakeholders,  
19 including stakeholders in that community on these  
20 things.

21 I want to, Lamar, if anything you want to  
22 throw in on that.

23 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: Good  
24 afternoon. I just want to echo what the Commissioner  
25 just said. We are in close coordination with our

2 partners, NYCHA, HPD, and the VA on their projects as  
3 they have been moving forward, and we broadcast that  
4 information, we provide that information to all  
5 individuals with their inquiries currently. This is  
6 the third rung on the housing ladder for us,  
7 affordable housing. It is a concern and it's  
8 something that we're actively focusing on.

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We've made  
10 presentations to REBNY, we've made presentations to  
11 the Real Estate Board of New York, to the Supportive  
12 Housing Network of New York, to the New York State  
13 Affordable, NYSAFA, New York State Association for  
14 Affordable Housing, so we've done what we can to be  
15 on offense on this so folks know.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Because I do  
17 too. Whenever I hear about anything that's going up,  
18 I always add to it, well what about our vets, are you  
19 making room for a certain amount of housing for  
20 veterans. Now, of course, again, we come back to the  
21 same thing, which there's no self-identifying. So,  
22 the population here is growing, but it's not growing  
23 at a pace that it could actually be growing, because  
24 the more you grow and the more self-identifying,  
25 naturally, the funds follow, I would hope. So, you

2 know, we come back to the same thing about getting  
3 the word out, how do we do it. Bob brought up a very  
4 modest amount of, like, another two million dollars.  
5 What the hell is two million dollars, when you think  
6 about it? We're going to pass a budget that's 116  
7 billion dollars. So, I don't understand why we cannot  
8 see ourselves clear enough to allow the vets to do  
9 your organization, like you said, that's still in its  
10 infant stages, quite frankly, to be able to get the  
11 word out and do what you need to do. The more people  
12 know, we've said this again and again with every  
13 Committee hearing, the more people know, the more  
14 they want to engage because they don't know what's  
15 available to them unless they engage. So, again, we  
16 circle back to the same thing, getting the word out.

17 I just want to touch, if I may, on some  
18 of the vendor permit fees and all of that. What's  
19 going on with some of our vendors? Can you bring me  
20 up to speed a little bit on that?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for that  
22 question. With the vendors, it goes back to assist  
23 and informed. So, for us, it's making sure the  
24 vendors know if they have needs from certain agencies  
25 where to go, and that's why we put that on

2 nyc.gov/vetvendor, so we're not in the woods in  
3 certain ways, but if a vendor says, hey, you know, I  
4 have a need, who do I go to at the Department of  
5 Sanitation, who do I go to at Parks, who do I go to  
6 at the Department of Health or at the Department of  
7 Consumer Workforce Protection? So for us, our main  
8 role there is to tie them in to those things, and we  
9 try to bring more of our vendors in with the Veteran  
10 Business Leadership Association. It's one of the  
11 things I was recommending, if an opportunity comes  
12 for us to, we think that there's a there's an  
13 opportunity there in having, I guess, business  
14 counseling specific to veteran street vendors. That's  
15 something we think is an opportunity we'd like to  
16 explore between us or between council as far as  
17 something. But for us, a lot of it is assist and  
18 inform, Council Member, and we put that information  
19 on nyc.gov/vetvendors.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Very good.

21 (TIMER CHIME) What the heck was that?

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That was the five-  
23 minute clock.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: That was

25 (INAUDIBLE) that you had enough. Okay. One other

2 thing, I actually lost my train. I'm sorry. I'll come  
3 back as soon as I think of it.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to say  
5 something you mentioned about self-identification.

6 (CROSS-TALK)

7 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: (INAUDIBLE) With  
8 every, let's say, civil service test that's being  
9 given out for our sanitation workers, for our  
10 firemen, for our police, all of this, would it be, is  
11 it against the rules to actually, I know there used  
12 to be that little box that they would check, are you  
13 a veteran, and due to the stigma that some feel is  
14 attached to identifying as a veteran, they don't  
15 check the box. But is that box still there? Because  
16 I'm thinking about how we could recruit the young  
17 veterans that are done with their service, active  
18 service, some are in reserve, and yet they go out for  
19 City work. Maybe we could figure out a way to hit  
20 this younger generation and figure out, you know, as  
21 they apply for work, what's available to them as a  
22 vet. Is there any way we could kind of tie in the  
23 two, whereas we could make it work that way?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So right now, and  
25 Cass, jumping off, it's folks applying to use their

2 veteran credit or the disabled veteran credit when  
3 they apply. That's where, you know, places we can be  
4 able to, doorways where when you're applying, where  
5 we could learn who you are when it comes to civil  
6 service exams. Also, we know that there's the one-  
7 time fee waiver for military spouses. So, those are  
8 different gates for that. The other piece of it is,  
9 now that we have a handle on who is coming, the  
10 people who are inbound, they fill out a DD-2648 form  
11 where they're telling the military, I'm going to end  
12 my service at this point. I'm going to transition to  
13 New York. Having that contact is key because we can  
14 lean in to reach out to that airman before they leave  
15 the service, or that sailor, that Marine, that  
16 soldier, etc., and make them aware of all these  
17 things. And so we've got on our team, you know, under  
18 Cass, one of our folks who focuses on employment and  
19 entrepreneurship, who does engage so that the  
20 veterans do know about those opportunities.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I'm just trying  
22 to figure out a way to get more people to come  
23 forward because there are so many out there.

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: The good thing about  
25 what we're doing is we know who they are inbound now,

2 which is an upside. And when it comes to the self...  
3 what I want to mention demographically, the trick is  
4 a lot of veterans are coming here. When 5,000 out of  
5 200,000 are transitioning here each year, that's a  
6 lot of people...

7 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: That's a lot.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: But are they  
9 staying? And so that's the thing. So, for us, it's  
10 like live, learn, work in New York. How do we make it  
11 so that you see a pathway? A lot of them come here to  
12 learn, and they can get a job. It's living here. So  
13 that, just to give the whole thing.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah. It's a  
15 vicious cycle of they can't afford to live here. You  
16 know, they'll go down in North Carolina, South  
17 Carolina, Virginia, all out west, Tennessee, wherever  
18 they can live for less and have a very good quality  
19 of life. It's the same thing that's going on with  
20 regular civilians. We're trying to keep regular folks  
21 here too, you know, people like you and me who are  
22 finding it harder and harder to stay in New York  
23 City. So, all right, I thank you for your time. Thank  
24 you very much.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Council  
3 Member Paladino.

4 I just want to talk about... oh, Council  
5 Member Marmorato has... okay, I'm sorry, I just  
6 noticed.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you. Can  
8 I talk? Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for coming  
9 today.

10 So, I kind of wanted to build off of the  
11 veteran street vendors. Do we know how many there are  
12 currently in New York City?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Got to get the  
14 number back to you. I'm so sorry. We have that. We  
15 did get information from the Department of Consumer  
16 Workforce Protection with our live number because we  
17 held an event back in November 2023 for the group,  
18 and so we got to get back to you about that. I will  
19 say that it's more than 200, but I will get back to  
20 what we're tracking. Thank you so much for that. Yep.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: And do you know  
22 about how much the fee is to have a street license?

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't know  
24 offhand. We can get back to you on that, and I got to  
25 say, I think I saw him here before, Robert Belcabere,

2 who's one of our leaders in the street vendor  
3 community, I believe is behind me right now, who may  
4 be testifying. I don't want to speak out of turn, but  
5 I'm hoping... we'll work to get you these data points  
6 as far as the number that we're tracking and price  
7 point for some of the licenses.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Okay. And has  
9 there been any discussion about potentially waiving  
10 the permit fees for veterans who are wishing to  
11 obtain these street licenses?

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Not that I know of.  
13 It's not that the discussion hasn't occurred. I'm not  
14 aware of it, Madam Council Member. We got to do the  
15 homework and get back to you with these answers.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: If not, would  
17 you consider exploring this?

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Okay, great. I  
20 did want to also say that at the last DVS event in my  
21 office was a complete success. We had about 10  
22 people, family members as well, veterans and family  
23 members. I was happy because I think the first two we  
24 did was maybe less than five, but I felt like it  
25 really picked up this time. And once we start coming

2 once a month, I'm going to start going to all of the  
3 legions and areas in the community where we're going  
4 to make the flyers and we're going to put it out and  
5 we're going to try to do the outreach to our  
6 community specifically to hopefully have another  
7 successful event like that so I thank you for the  
8 services and I appreciate it and District 13  
9 obviously always appreciates it.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We appreciate you.

11 It's crawl, walk, run for us in that once we get you  
12 all the folks in 13 who are veterans, we believe that  
13 the numbers that come to those pop-up VRCs will  
14 increase for everyone here, all in Council. And so  
15 the hope is that this spring, within the coming  
16 weeks, you'll get your first drop from us of all the  
17 veterans that we're tracking in your Districts. On  
18 average, the City Council has about 171,000 members  
19 on average of people who live in their District. We  
20 believe somewhere around 4,000 or so are veterans on  
21 average. And so as we get you this and you have it  
22 down to the email address, the phone number, the  
23 physical address, that it can help amplify things. So  
24 even as this veteran resource center initiative  
25 really comes into play, that you'll have folks

2 coming. You'll do events and people will be there.  
3 And so this is the next step for us as we go from  
4 just connect to the mobilize piece.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: It was not just  
6 veterans, it was their spouses and family members,  
7 and it was just really... like I felt good seeing it so  
8 I appreciate that. Thank you, guys, so much for your  
9 time. Thank you, Chair.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes. And just the  
11 veteran resources centers in each Council District  
12 will make an impact, I think, in self-identifying and  
13 also getting the services. So that, you know, that's  
14 what we have to look forward to. It's just, you know,  
15 I'm a little impatient on that because that's going  
16 to take a while. That will take several years before  
17 I think we see the actual numbers move.

18 But let's talk about the federal issue  
19 now, which, you know, while the federal funding does  
20 not directly fund the budget for DVS, federal  
21 programs do provide significant services and support  
22 programs to our veterans residing in the city. The  
23 new federal administration has already made  
24 significant cuts to health programs, social services,  
25 and veteran specific programs, which negatively

2 impacts veterans residing in the city, who are  
3 already underserved, and we know this, you know, and  
4 I don't know if you have information, but, you know,  
5 with the DVS limited resources and, you know, we'll  
6 likely not be able to fill the gaps left by federal  
7 cuts unless OMB comes around, but what impact do you  
8 see in the federal changes had so far in city  
9 veterans?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to answer  
11 this a couple different ways, I don't know if Lamar  
12 or Cass want to add to it. It's terrifying what's  
13 going on to call that out, just seeing everything in  
14 real time where you've got two sides of this, where  
15 our community members may be terminated from their  
16 employment on one side, on the other side they go to  
17 the VA for care and, you know, they may not have as  
18 much available on that to be able to help them. At  
19 the same time, for DVS, for many of our major  
20 efforts, it's that we were a part of a larger  
21 partnership of other entities and we're one piece in  
22 this, and so like we didn't get from 46 to 77 to 624  
23 homeless veterans, just us. This was us working with  
24 a continuum of care that has roughly 50 members. And  
25 so for us, in the instance of housing, if the VA has

2 issues where it's lacking, then it's us leaning more  
3 on other members of that continuum of care to try to  
4 still deliver. With claims, we have a claims team,  
5 but we're happy that there's this Veteran Resource  
6 Center initiative funded by the Council, where you're  
7 seeing not just us, but more folks from the Veterans  
8 of Foreign Wars side who will be available to help  
9 with claims. We also see that Northwell is accepting  
10 VetConnectNYC referrals to also help veterans with  
11 their claims, and so you're not just seeing us with  
12 this, but a team approach. Same thing with  
13 employment, as far as it's not just DVS, it's working  
14 with the America Job Centers, working with our  
15 friends at Small Business Services Department,  
16 working with other entities to kind of get at this.  
17 And so at a meta level, as these things are stepping  
18 back on the VA side, the team is stepping up more.  
19 And even there's some things here when you look at  
20 it, you know, if it's a team approach, you know, we  
21 may score some more of the goals every now and then,  
22 but it's still a team so there may be some metrics  
23 where you see a certain spike on what DVS is doing,  
24 but we're a part of this larger dynamic where the  
25 other partners, even from the VA, say, look, let's

2 get this to you guys here, you're the best fit, etc.,  
3 for things so I just want to kind of flag that as far  
4 as a way to approach what's going on.

5 I want to add, Lamar, Cass, anything you  
6 want to add to that?

7 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: No. I  
8 just wanted to say that as part of the New York City  
9 continuum of care trying to end veteran homelessness,  
10 I'm part of the Veteran Task Force to address those  
11 issues. We are doubling down on our collective use of  
12 resources, collectively. City resources, VA  
13 resources, resources that are in the community. We're  
14 just doubling down. We meet monthly, and in every  
15 meeting there's a large agenda. You know, how are we  
16 going to, or someone may have an issue, give you an  
17 example. Non-profit may be the primary provider for,  
18 let's say, temporary financial assistance. We talk.  
19 I'm running low. HRA, can you help me? You know, can  
20 you step in the gap until my next quarter funds kick  
21 in? We're talking, so we know what, you know, where  
22 everybody's at, and we're just communicating and  
23 trying to close ranks and fill in the gaps where we  
24 can.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But what are you  
3 seeing from the feds, the VA, at least now? Are you  
4 seeing a drop-off? Are you seeing people that just  
5 have been terminated in the VA that are not getting  
6 back to you, and is anybody filling there?

7 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: We're  
8 seeing a slight decline.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You are seeing a  
10 longer wait for answers?

11 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: Not  
12 necessarily for answers, but for appointments for our  
13 clients. We're seeing, me being housing, HUD-VASH is  
14 very critical for those eligible veterans that  
15 qualify for HUD-VASH. The last time I checked, I  
16 believe, was Monday. They still have 50, I believe,  
17 approximately 50 people that are still waiting on a  
18 HUD-VASH worker to be assigned, and they can't hire  
19 anybody.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's important to  
21 note the difference between us and traditionally, we  
22 usually focus on the veterans who are not eligible  
23 for VA healthcare because we provide the follow-on  
24 social services, critical time interventions, etc.,  
25 whereas the VA focuses on those who are eligible for

2 VA healthcare. So, if you are HUD-VASH, you would  
3 have a VA social worker who would work with you. If  
4 you are not eligible for VA healthcare, you'd have  
5 VASH, collaborative case management, we would work  
6 with you. What Lamar is saying is we're seeing more  
7 cases where there's no VA social worker, there's this  
8 backlog, and so we're filling in that gap. That's a  
9 knock directly to what he's seeing in housing. I just  
10 want to make sure we explain that.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, are you hearing  
12 from the VA workers that a lot of people are being  
13 cut, and I have a bigger caseload? I mean, that's  
14 obvious, I would think if you have less employees,  
15 fewer employees, less workers, that there's going to  
16 be longer waits on all of the above.

17 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: What I  
18 am hearing, Chair, is that there's a lot of  
19 uncertainty about everything.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

21 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: Just  
22 uncertainty. They're not saying that, I haven't heard  
23 anyone lose their jobs yet, but there's a lot of  
24 uncertainty about how services will be applied going  
25 forward.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So,  
3 Commissioner, if you could let this Committee know  
4 that we could somehow advocate on your behalf that if  
5 you see a drop-off in any particular area that we  
6 need to notify Washington and VA, that you let you  
7 actually inform my office and the Committee's  
8 offices, and we can at least say things maybe that  
9 you couldn't say to them, but we could also know  
10 where we could help your cause and certainly help the  
11 veterans cause. I'd appreciate that.

12 Now let's go back to the positions that  
13 you're trying to fill. What are some of the bigger  
14 challenges, like for, obviously training personnel  
15 within DVS, it would take some time. So, if you're  
16 going to hire new hires, if you did have the money  
17 for new hires, it would take some time to train the  
18 personnel. But if you had more positions, so if we're  
19 going to ask OMB for more positions, such as having  
20 more staff, provide better administrative and  
21 logistical support for our veterans, let's say even  
22 for the Advisory Board, what are some of the biggest  
23 challenges you have as Commissioner of DVS to keep  
24 the staff up to date? Not only what's going on with  
25 the VA in Washington, but also on a local front here.

2                   COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think one part of  
3 what you said I want to speak to, it takes time to  
4 bring in folks who have certain expertise in this  
5 agency. You know, on Lamar's side of the house, as  
6 far as with housing, it takes years to have someone  
7 come in and who's skilled and able to handle all  
8 these different housing challenges veterans present  
9 and understand not just the traditional programs, but  
10 all the veteran affiliated programs, even offerings  
11 that non-profits provide, etc., so it takes time to  
12 have someone who is a Jedi, so to speak, on the  
13 housing side. Same thing for claims. Where there's  
14 not just the training to get accredited and learn how  
15 to process the claims. You've got, you know, Mike  
16 Bucchini (phonetic) runs our claims team. If he was  
17 here, he would say it takes about a year or so for  
18 that person to get decent at it. It takes three to  
19 four years for them to get very good. It's almost  
20 equivalent to a doctor providing an operation. Do you  
21 want the doctor who just started figuring this stuff  
22 out, or do you want a doctor who's got more reps and  
23 at-bats before you go into surgery? And so I think a  
24 key piece is just these are such bespoke roles that  
25 we have in things that we offer between the core

2 services of burials, of housing, and of claims so I'd  
3 say that's a piece.

4           Another dynamic here is maintaining your  
5 awareness of all the goings-on, of all the things  
6 that keep changing in what you do. You know, there  
7 are veterans who go to lawyers to have their claims  
8 work submitted, to give you an idea of just how  
9 nuanced and how tricky it can be and how bureaucratic  
10 it is, and so to stay aware of different changes and  
11 protocols and policies. We know the VA right now,  
12 when you submit a claim, they use an IBM tool that is  
13 AI now to go through that claim, to provide an  
14 initial assessment, etc. Okay, well, let's learn more  
15 about that AI so we can speak to it, because if the  
16 VA has fewer raters due to reduction of force, folks  
17 are going to rely more on the AI, and we need to be  
18 able to account for that. That's a professional  
19 development piece, as an example, and the continuum  
20 of care on the housing side also is constantly doing  
21 professional development to make sure folks are aware  
22 of, once again, city, state, federal, public,  
23 private, non-profit options, so that when you come to  
24 someone from DVS, we can speak to you about all that  
25 is available to you when trying to help.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. You know, I  
3 have most of my staff, when I hired them over seven  
4 years ago, it takes a long time to maneuver all the  
5 City agencies and to try to find out the contacts and  
6 then how to solve a particular problem with  
7 constituent services so I understand it and how  
8 valuable having staff that's been around over seven  
9 years. When I lose one, it is a tremendous haul,  
10 because, obviously, you have a small agency, I have a  
11 small office, you know, we have eight or nine  
12 constituent service people, but they're so valuable  
13 that they have experience, and losing one is  
14 devastating, because you lose the expertise, you lose  
15 how to maneuver in and out of City agencies, the  
16 bureaucrats that certainly, that they come in contact  
17 with, it's very difficult, so I understand that.

18 But let's talk about the Joseph P. Dwyer  
19 Veterans Peer Support Program. In the Preliminary  
20 Plan, there was an adjustment for the Joseph P. Dwyer  
21 Veterans Peer Support Program, which transferred  
22 676,390 dollars from the Department of Health and  
23 Mental Hygiene in Fiscal Year 2025. With this  
24 additional funding, DVS' Fiscal 2025 budget for this  
25 program is 1.1 million, dropping the baselined amount

2 of 416,000, starting in Fiscal 2026. How is this  
3 amount calculated, and how will this additional  
4 funding be utilized?

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much  
6 for that question, Mr. Chair. I want to level set,  
7 and then get in the weeds of what's going on with the  
8 Dwyer piece.

9 Let's talk about how it's calculated, and  
10 I'll go back to the other dynamics. The City has  
11 received funding tied to the Joseph P. Dwyer program  
12 since FY23 for the New York City, as far as how we  
13 recognize the City. The State, it ties back to FY21,  
14 I'll get into that a little bit. So, since the, you  
15 know, April 20, 2020, and FY21, that's when Dwyer  
16 money, that spigot first turned on, come to the City  
17 of New York. Money did not come to us at all during  
18 FY22 of the State. It all went to the Headstrong  
19 Project. It was a member-directed situation where one  
20 of the members of the Senate made some tweak at the  
21 State level, and all that money went directly to the  
22 Headstrong Project during the State's FY22. So, when  
23 we talk about this money, I'll speak State and I'll  
24 stay in City for the rest of this time. It's State  
25 FY21, State FY23, State FY24, State FY25, State FY26.

2 And so when I speak about this, I'm going to be  
3 speaking how that carries over to us as a City, FY23  
4 to FY26, and so I just wanted to level set on that.

5           Now the other pieces with Dwyer, things  
6 that must be said, we've taken a novel approach with  
7 how we execute Dwyer. This is the only municipality  
8 in the state that does Dwyer the way we do it, where  
9 it's run almost like a grant, if you will, and it  
10 took time to do that within the constructs of  
11 government. Putting together a concept paper, a quest  
12 for expressions of interest, running a pilot program,  
13 and we're currently in operation as far as going from  
14 crawl to walk to run. Another thing with Dwyer, the  
15 money takes a circuitous path. It travels from the  
16 State's Department of Health, or Office of Mental  
17 Health, to the City's Department of Health, to us,  
18 and so because it's taking that long path, for years  
19 we would get the money and not have much time to  
20 spend it so we'd get it and be like, oh this is old  
21 State money, you only have so much time to spend it.  
22 It created certain backlogs. That will not happen  
23 moving forward. Starting in July, Office of  
24 Management and Budget will recognize Dwyer money  
25 right away for us. So instead of us being in a

2 situation where we have this lag and are caught up  
3 with, hey, the money just arrived, you have just a  
4 few months to spend it, sometimes less time than  
5 that, we will be able to, as soon as Fiscal Year  
6 begins, count all this money. The next thing to say  
7 about Dwyer, there's a 70/30 split in how this money  
8 is conferred. No more than 30 percent of Dwyer funds  
9 go to the overhead aspects of it. Anything that  
10 involves say communications, the data component, any  
11 sort of reporting and monitoring, etc. Any staff that  
12 we have that supports Dwyer, no more than 30 percent.  
13 The remaining 70 percent or more is going to go out  
14 to the community so it's intended for the community.  
15 And the other piece, we do this, when I speak to  
16 this, I'm speaking to five years of funding as far as  
17 all those years that we've got. So '23, '24, '25,  
18 '26, all these years of funding and looking at it  
19 holistically. We got caught up in a situation where  
20 we needed to push out money on the overhead side  
21 first because we had these short turnarounds, and so  
22 you saw more money at first going to the overhead  
23 side. You're seeing as we distribute, in real time  
24 we're sending out money to recipients, you're seeing

2 it get to where we're reaching that 70 percent  
3 balance as far as what's going out into 2026.

4           And so with all that as a backdrop, the  
5 total amount of Dwyer money that's been remitted to  
6 the City of New York from the State in the life of  
7 the program, it's 1.8 million dollars or 1,822,000  
8 dollars remitted, and that's the life of the program  
9 from what we've been spending from FY23 all the way  
10 through FY26, 1,822,000 dollars. The amount that has  
11 been spent thus far, \$345,879.94. Say again,  
12 \$345,879.94 spent thus far. The amount remains to be  
13 spent, we've got to keep getting out, \$1,476,120.06.  
14 \$1,476,120.06 remains to go out. When you look at how  
15 much has gone to the overhead piece, it's going to  
16 just keeping everything, you know, the administrative  
17 side, so far it's \$399,720.06 that's going out on the  
18 overhead piece. Excuse me, let me rephrase, how much  
19 has gone out so far, it's \$145,879.94 on overhead has  
20 gone out thus far, \$145,879.94. When it comes to  
21 what's going to the community, 200,000.00 has gone to  
22 the community thus far, and so it's about 42 percent,  
23 it's 42/58 is the cut right now, but in real time  
24 we're funding projects.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you really have  
3 to have a team to manage this too.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, and that's  
5 another thing, when we talk about the overhead piece,  
6 when we talk about overhead as far as what it  
7 supports, also the personnel too, as far as there's a  
8 data, there's personnel, there's the comms of it, but  
9 for now the key pieces are that we're in a place  
10 where it's 42 percent has gone out, but we have so  
11 much more money that's going to be pushed, so you'll  
12 see us land the plane at 70/30, and so, you know, we  
13 look at how much the total amount is 1.8 million.  
14 What's not yet been spent, what needs to be spent is  
15 about 1.5 million, it still needs to be spent, and  
16 then we're getting to a place where by the end of  
17 FY26 you'll see us at 70/30 with this, where in real  
18 time, like literally today, we're pushing out more  
19 money.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But why are we doing  
21 just one Fiscal Year worth of funding?

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good question. So,  
23 right now, it started out, the first year was 150,  
24 the next year funding, remember we skipped a year in  
25 the State's (INAUDIBLE), the next year was 400, it

2 went up to 416, then it's currently going to be at  
3 428 as far as the FY25 amount, and then after that,  
4 because the State does a cost-of-living adjustment,  
5 we know that it'll be at least 428 with what comes  
6 from FY26.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How many veterans  
8 have been served by this program so far in Fiscal  
9 2025?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So far as far as  
11 pilot projects, and we're just now sending money out  
12 that's going to be used by the recipients in '25 and  
13 '26, and so when I speak to what's been served, I got  
14 to speak to what came before that through the pilot  
15 aspect of Dwyer. So the pilot aspect of Dwyer, and  
16 that's FY23 and 24, you have four different projects,  
17 and it's four projects valued at, and I want to  
18 correct that, I'm sorry, it's five projects, you look  
19 at four during FY23 and then one during FY24, and so  
20 you've got, you know, five projects where it's more  
21 than 87 that have been served through those five  
22 projects. It's 87, but it's all unique persons served  
23 as 87. So, if you're doing chair yoga and the yoga is  
24 meeting, say, regularly, you only count it one time.  
25 If you're doing equine therapy and that program's

2 meeting regularly, you only count it one time, and so  
3 it's 87 served by those five projects, you know, as  
4 far as the pilot period for FY23 and '24. Forgive me,  
5 there's one of the projects where I do not have the  
6 number on me right now, so you got to forgive me for  
7 that. That's why I say it's 87, but we'll get you the  
8 number when you add that fifth project.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, we have a basic  
10 number for '25, but what about '26? How many veterans  
11 do you expect in Fiscal 2026?

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'll say it like  
13 this, you've got 31 different projects that money's  
14 going out in real time for '25-'26, so 30 different  
15 recipients for 31 different projects for those years.  
16 I don't want to put an estimate. I got to get back  
17 and talk with Ellen Greene, who's running this whole  
18 thing, you know, our Assistant Commissioner for  
19 Strategic Engagement, but we are seeing with the  
20 pilot, it was a cohort-based model, and it was  
21 something that focused on peer-to-peer engagement in  
22 socialization settings, and so when you look at what  
23 was happening before, where you had these unique  
24 folks, but who were meeting regularly, you know, we  
25 pray to see more of that and with a larger imprint.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How do you get the  
3 word out on this? What type of advertising do you do?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We were mentioned at  
5 different veteran public engagements as far as if  
6 there was, you know, a parade or a different  
7 commemoration or an event we spoke at, we would say.  
8 We also kept it in our newsletter. We also mentioned  
9 it, you know, and in this hearing, oftentimes I  
10 mentioned Dwyer because the deadline was December  
11 2nd, and so we're happy. Our goal was to have at  
12 least 30, and we wound up having 31 efforts funded,  
13 ultimately through Dwyer, and so for us it was  
14 traditional things that were available to us. We  
15 think that now that the community sees this and knows  
16 every other year DVS will have this funding  
17 opportunity available, we think we'll see more  
18 traction with it, and we hope to have more people  
19 apply.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, the advertising  
21 and outreach for the program, do you think it's been  
22 effective, or could you do better if we had more  
23 funding?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think it's what  
25 you said, as far as it takes time to build new things

2 and to get the word out for things and recognize that  
3 we already have overhead that we account for through  
4 Dwyer. We've got resources through Dwyer to help get  
5 it out. It's just it's a new thing you've got to  
6 educate the public. You have some folks who may be  
7 wary at first about doing this, but now that they see  
8 it, and especially once people see these projects,  
9 the 31 activities in action, I think we'll see more  
10 folks when the time to apply next year for the FY27-  
11 28 funding comes.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. So, tell  
13 me how involved will DVS be in the implementation of  
14 the program? You know, if for-profits or non-profits  
15 are taking the lead, what role does DVS expect to  
16 take?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, we got to  
18 manage this from a contracting standpoint in that  
19 it's still something that flows through us through  
20 either micro-purchases or master contracts so there's  
21 the contracting component, and then there's also the  
22 reporting aspect of it. Once we get into the next  
23 iteration of Dwyer, you'll see a more dynamic  
24 approach where everyone will be in the master  
25 contract, and it'll be us saying, okay, well this is

2 what you want to do, let's have a back-and-forth, we  
3 can determine what to, you know, to send resources  
4 to, and what to not send resources to, so we'll be  
5 able to, in a very balanced way, through a master  
6 agreement and task orders, fund things in real time.  
7 It's almost like a general on the battlefield  
8 directing resources based on what we see, but you  
9 need data to do that, you need reporting to do that,  
10 and we hope to spread the word about these activities  
11 to all in the community.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I have a couple more  
13 questions, and then I think we could listen to,  
14 obviously, the public, but I want to talk about  
15 something near and dear to me, RTM therapy, which I  
16 had brought up at several hearings. Various studies  
17 have demonstrated that reconsolidation of traumatic  
18 memories, we call RTM, and meditation are effective  
19 approaches in addressing post-traumatic stress and  
20 other mental health concerns among veterans. In the  
21 Council's Fiscal 2025 budget response, we called on  
22 the Administration to fund 50,000 dollars for an RTM  
23 pilot program, which is a very small amount, to  
24 provide this trauma treatment to City veterans  
25 impacted by PTSD, but no additional funding was

2 included in the final budget. This year, I put  
3 forward Intro. 1171 to conduct a one-year feasibility  
4 study on implementing a pilot program for RTM. Which  
5 path does DVS think is the best for RTM at this  
6 point, allocating funding directly in the budget or  
7 supporting passage of this Intro.?

8           COMMISSIONER HENDON: Let me think on it,  
9 because I feel like for the question, I'm going to  
10 repeat the question, it's the ideal, the goal is for  
11 RTM to be funded and for it to be more embraced  
12 overall is the goal, and the question is, is it  
13 having 1171 pass with the feasibility study, or is  
14 it, you know, having this be something that's just  
15 accounted for in the budget right away? I think it's  
16 a good question as far as what, which path, because  
17 either of them will get you where you got to go with  
18 this thing. I think what's tough about the  
19 feasibility study, and we mentioned this in our last  
20 hearings, Mr. Chair, what's tough about the  
21 feasibility study is that we've got to be careful as  
22 to not seem to be performing a third-party review of  
23 a medical modality, and that's something that is  
24 avoided in general by our Department of Health and by  
25 all in City government is to avoid doing that, that's

2 something that's typically done by academic  
3 institutions and others external to government...

4 (CROSS-TALK)

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) I get it.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: If it's an  
7 operational analysis, that is something that we are  
8 able to do, so if it's about the operational side of  
9 it and not the academic side of it, then that is  
10 something that we are able to do, and so that is  
11 something that's available as far as a feasibility  
12 study. I really think it's a question of  
13 strategically, is it more important to have some sort  
14 of operational assessment of what this could look  
15 like and how it could be, you know, relayed, which is  
16 what 1171 is seeking to do, or do we just put the  
17 money on the table right away and just have them  
18 begin as far as whatever non-profit, be it Operation  
19 Warrior Shield or the Recovery Recognition Project,  
20 just give them money, say, look, start doing  
21 something. I feel like that's a strategic choice. You  
22 know, for me right now, if you ask, I think that 1171  
23 makes more sense to get an idea of the operational  
24 side, so we know how deep the rabbit hole goes here.  
25 I think if you're looking at one or the other

2 investment, so you've got more wind behind you to be  
3 able to say, look, this is the assessment of it,  
4 here's how all this lays out, and so now let's talk  
5 about a larger thing. That's just me from you asking  
6 the question right now, Mr. Chairman.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. I know. For  
8 me, I don't care how we achieve it, just as long as  
9 we have the program, and so I would say 50,000  
10 dollars, I mean, that's such a small amount that the  
11 Administration should actually really make this a  
12 program, because what we can learn from it is that, I  
13 mean, I spoke to many, many veterans, I also spoke to  
14 the doctor that came up with the treatment, and maybe  
15 it's the point of, I'm very optimistic, you know, on  
16 this, because a lot of things haven't worked for our  
17 veterans in the past, and they're not getting the  
18 treatment. I mean, just the other day, a couple of  
19 days ago, I've spoken to a disabled veteran in the  
20 Iraqi war, and he was talking to me about the  
21 anniversary when he was deployed and how he was  
22 affected by it, and he never got any treatment from  
23 the VA, and I did talk to him about RTM, and he never  
24 heard of it, but I said, I think it's worth a try.  
25 We're at a point where so many Vietnam veterans are

2 certainly affected by PTSD, and they haven't received  
3 treatment at all in decades so I'm looking, you know,  
4 for such a small amount, just to show people that it  
5 works. I think it works, and speaking to the people  
6 that have gone through the program, and there are  
7 hundreds of doctors and counselors that are trained  
8 in RTM in this metropolitan area so everything's in  
9 place, we just have to have a small amount of money,  
10 but I appreciate your response on it.

11           Let's talk about the real property tax  
12 exemption for Cold War veterans, which we had spoken  
13 on this Committee several times. In May of 2022,  
14 Introduction 377 of 2022, sponsored by then-Council  
15 Member Borelli, was introduced to grant a real  
16 property tax exemption to Cold War veterans who  
17 served on active duty in the United States Armed  
18 Forces between September 2nd, 1945, and December 26,  
19 1991, and were honorably discharged. This exemption  
20 would apply to the veterans' primary residence, and  
21 the exemption would be for 15 percent of the assessed  
22 value on residential property, capped at 39,000, and  
23 would remain in effect for 10 years. Additionally,  
24 Cold War veterans who are disabled due to their  
25 service would be eligible for an additional exemption

2 of up to 130,000. This legislation was reintroduced  
3 in the current session as Introduction 740, with  
4 Council Member Carr as the sponsor. What is DVS'  
5 position on extending property tax exemptions to Cold  
6 War veterans, and does the Administration agree with  
7 that position?

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to pass to  
9 Cass to speak to this, but in so many words, we're  
10 supportive of it. I have a question, Mr. Chairman,  
11 and I'll throw to Cass for this. Has Intro. 740  
12 officially been heard?

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No.

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Okay. Thank you.

15 CHIEF-OF-STAFF ALVAREZ: I'll just add on  
16 to what the Commissioner had said, that we're  
17 generally supportive. We're just running the traps  
18 internally to see how DVS can best advocate.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We brought it up at  
20 several hearings, though, and it won't amount to a  
21 lot of money. We estimated, again, a very small  
22 amount for the State, but, you know, other  
23 municipalities have implemented this exemption. What  
24 do you think New York City and State haven't really  
25 come across?

2           COMMISSIONER HENDON: I can't speak to the  
3 larger piece. I do know that the story I was told  
4 when we first started looking at this, when it first  
5 was flagged, coming out of Council Member Borelli,  
6 was that years ago, the Council decided to push two  
7 out of the three property tax exemptions available to  
8 veterans. I don't know if it was about the economic  
9 issues at the time, but this was more than ten years  
10 ago when we first embraced these exemptions, and  
11 there are three different exemptions that every tax  
12 jurisdiction is able to employ that the State has  
13 authorized when it comes to veterans. One is the  
14 eligible funds exemption. One is the alternative  
15 veterans property tax exemption. Another is the Cold  
16 War veterans property tax exemption. Eligible funds  
17 exemption is basically, I can use monies that I've  
18 earned in the military towards my purchase, and it  
19 can have favorable tax implications. It's the one  
20 that's not used as much, but it is existing. The  
21 alternative veterans tax exemption is, I am a wartime  
22 era veteran, and I can use this exemption. This is  
23 what is used by a lot of folks right now. I use it  
24 myself. And then there's the Cold War property tax  
25 exemption, which effectively is, it's for peacetime

2 era veterans, and so when we first looked into this,  
3 it was a decision on the Council's side to only  
4 embrace two out of the three. We presume it may be  
5 for revenue reasons or budget reasons. We pray that  
6 it can be fixed at this time, and you know, I don't  
7 know the inner workings, but know that, like I said,  
8 the Administration is supportive of this.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I would hope so.  
10 Okay, I guess that's...

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And Mr. Chair, I  
12 want to clarify one of the questions on Dwyer. You've  
13 got it right. It is 87 for all those five projects,  
14 as far as 87 unique veterans for the five projects.  
15 We hope that in the future when we're reporting,  
16 we'll be able to speak to not only the number of  
17 veterans, but the number of instances they've been  
18 engaged with Dwyer. And to be very clear, total from  
19 FY23-26 in the City Fiscal Years, it's 1,822,000  
20 total allocated to the City of New York. So far, what  
21 remains to be spent is \$1,476,120.06, and in real  
22 time, we're seeing money pushed out to the  
23 communities to get this stuff done. Just wanted to  
24 say those things for the record.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you  
3 for that, and then thank you, Commissioner and your  
4 Staff, for the testimony today. I think we covered a  
5 lot of ground. I know that you will stay for the  
6 public testimony, as you always do, and we thank you  
7 for that. You're one of the few Commissioners and  
8 Staff that does that, so I want to thank you again.  
9 And again, thank you for waiting this long for this  
10 hearing, which we got pushed back a few hours, but  
11 again, I thank you for your 11 pages of testimony. We  
12 have a lot of facts that we could look at and  
13 decipher, but again, thank you, Commissioner, for  
14 your work. Thanks.

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

16 CHIEF-OF-STAFF ALVAREZ: Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. I now open the  
18 hearing for public testimony.

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

23 The witness table is reserved for people  
24 who wish to testify. No video recording or  
25 photography is allowed from the witness table.

2 Further, members of the public may not present audio  
3 or video recordings as testimony, but may submit  
4 transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant-at-  
5 Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

6 If you wish to speak at today's hearing,  
7 please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-  
8 at-Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized,  
9 you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing  
10 topic, and it's the Preliminary Budget. That's the  
11 topic.

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

16 So, I will now call the first panel.  
17 Ashton Stewart, Brian Ellicott Cook, Peter Kempner,  
18 and Joe Bello.

19 ASHTON STEWART: Thank you so much, Chair  
20 Holden and the City Department of Veterans Services,  
21 Commissioner Hendon. My name is Ashton Stewart. I'm a  
22 member of the Veteran Advisory Board, Secretary of  
23 St. Albans Board of Visitors, and member of VFW Post  
24 528, who is a recipient of the Dwyer Program. They're  
25 very excited about that. I submitted my testimony. I

2 just wanted to highlight a few important things in  
3 there. First and foremost, I participated in a  
4 Veteran Mental Health Coalition presentation with the  
5 City Department of Veterans Services last week,  
6 talking about the correlation between PTSD, dementia,  
7 and TBI. New research is coming out about this all  
8 the time. It's super important to learn more about it  
9 and to educate other providers to try to address some  
10 of the issues that you were bringing up. Just this  
11 month, I had two PTSD cases, Vietnam veterans. I was  
12 driving over to one's house to give him a  
13 proclamation and honor his service. I knew that he  
14 had survivor's guilt. The wife called me when I was  
15 just about to get there, telling me we got to  
16 reschedule. I learned the next day that it was  
17 because he was having suicide and homicidal  
18 tendencies and they had to remove him and put him in  
19 another facility. He was on home hospice before that.  
20 Needless to say, it made me feel very conflicted,  
21 like if I would have got there sooner, would have it  
22 made it better, would have it made him more  
23 triggered? I don't know, but we have resources for  
24 families to share through the We Honor Veterans  
25 program, which MGHS is a part of, to show caregivers

2 and providers how to recognize PTSD and how to  
3 comfort the patient, redirect them, put some music  
4 on, just acknowledge them and try to understand that,  
5 you know, when the mind is weakened because of  
6 dementia or their health conditions, this can happen,  
7 especially of Vietnam veterans, and we're seeing more  
8 and more in our hospice program at MGHS. I was  
9 working with DVS this morning getting the indigent  
10 burial reimbursement put in place for a veteran with  
11 no family and no income. I can't tell you how (TIMER  
12 CHIME) important these programs are. The statistics  
13 that the Commissioner shared are staggering with the  
14 aging population of veterans. I've been beating my  
15 drum about this for months. We could really use some  
16 support. I need some help in my program because I'm  
17 the only person running it right now at MGHS, but we  
18 really wanted to be able to be there for the veterans  
19 and their families. We're also designing a pocket  
20 card with the State Department of Veterans Services  
21 to help educate providers. There's less than 3  
22 percent in New York State who are culturally  
23 competent to work with veterans, and we really want  
24 to make a change on this. We are putting QR codes and  
25 resources within the card so they'll know exactly

2 what to do and how to engage with the veterans. Thank  
3 you so much for the opportunity to share my  
4 testimony.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. You're on  
6 the front lines and working with our veterans. Are  
7 you familiar with RTM at all?

8 ASHTON STEWART: I've heard of that type  
9 of therapy, yes, and I wish I could speak more about  
10 the effectiveness of it, but at this point I'm  
11 willing to get behind anything that's going to help.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. That's the way  
13 I feel. Let's try different things and let's see,  
14 because most of, you know, we had the veteran suicide  
15 rate had dropped, you know, years. Until 2006, I  
16 believe, we were below in veteran suicide, below the  
17 national average. Now, since 2006, we've gone up, and  
18 many more veterans are committing suicide than in the  
19 past, so that's why we're looking, I'm looking for,  
20 the great thing about RTM that I, when I spoke to Dr.  
21 Burke, who came up with this in the early 2000s, it's  
22 up to, you can have five sessions and really see a  
23 big difference in the individual. So, we're not  
24 talking about a large, you know, like years of  
25 therapy, we may be just talking about weeks of

2 therapy that could save a veteran or save a person,  
3 save a family, and that's why I'm so behind RTM,  
4 because I'm looking, you know, I'm very optimistic. I  
5 did have family members on who engaged with RTM and  
6 they speak highly of it. That's why I believe in it,  
7 but if we could get this 50,000-dollar pilot program  
8 off the ground, that would make your life a little  
9 easier.

10 ASHTON STEWART: I'll be so grateful for  
11 that, especially with the younger veterans where the  
12 TBI conditions have skyrocketed because of weaponry,  
13 and there's not enough knowledge about the damage  
14 that is causing for these vets, and I'm sure suicide  
15 ideation is a big part of it, and we've got to do  
16 everything we can to support veterans and their  
17 families (CROSS-TALK)

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you're seeing on  
19 the front lines what it does to the family, too.

20 ASHTON STEWART: Yeah.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Which...

22 ASHTON STEWART: Oh my god.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It can affect so many  
24 lives, more than just a veteran, that's what you've  
25 been talking about.

2 ASHTON STEWART: Absolutely, yes. Yes,  
3 sir. Thank you for everything you're doing.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

5 ASHTON STEWART: I appreciate your  
6 efforts.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much.

8 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: I'll be quite  
9 punctual. Good afternoon, Chair Holden, Members of  
10 the New York City Council Committee on Veterans. My  
11 name is Brian Ellicott Cook, and I serve as Director  
12 of Government Relations at SAGE, the nation's largest  
13 and oldest organization dedicated to improving the  
14 lives of LGBTQ+ older adults, and I'm here to testify  
15 on behalf of SAGE Vets, the only program in New York  
16 City specifically supporting LGBTQ+ older adult  
17 veterans. LGBT veterans have served with bravery,  
18 often while facing discrimination. Many experienced  
19 exclusion under harmful military policies, leaving  
20 them with lasting trauma. In New York City, 56  
21 percent of LGBTQ+ veterans are over the age of 50.  
22 SAGE Vets works to ensure that they have access to  
23 vital services, from healthcare to legal assistance.  
24 With your support, we've achieved significant  
25 victories, including discharge upgrades, eviction

2 prevention, and direct connection to our local VA  
3 hospitals. Last year, Finance Chair Justin Brannan  
4 stated that the budget was more than simply a  
5 financial plan and a list of the expenditures to our  
6 City's statement of values. It shows the rest of the  
7 world what the greatest city on the planet cares  
8 about. Yet, we can review the FY26 Preliminary  
9 Budget. It's clear that DVS remains stagnant. Its  
10 headcount basically unchanged, and it's budgeted  
11 roughly 494,000 dollars less than FY25 adopted  
12 budget. Unfortunately, today's political climate  
13 further threatens LGBTQ+ veterans, hostile rhetoric,  
14 and discriminatory policies of heightened fears,  
15 particularly for transgender veterans. Our City must  
16 stand firm in providing support and care. SAGE Vets  
17 respectfully requests a 100,000-dollar renewal of the  
18 legal services initiative in FY26 budget, and your  
19 continued support ensures that we expand our reach,  
20 provide essential resources, and uphold the dignity  
21 and well-being of our LGBTQ+ veterans. Thank you for  
22 your dedication to our New York City veterans.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Brian. Let  
24 me just ask a question. You said about the legal, the

2 100,000-dollar legal. What about medical services and  
3 mental health services?

4 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: So, SAGE Vets does  
5 run a weekly support group, which we do. The  
6 initiative that we get for the funding is for purely  
7 for the legal stuff... (CROSS-TALK)

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Legal part, but what  
9 about, you know, again, a population that is...

10 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: We're also state  
11 funded, which is where the money for our programs  
12 like art and the supports, that's where it comes in.  
13 We did also apply for the Dreyer funding fund, and  
14 we're still waiting to hear back.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So, we'll try  
16 to put a good word, but I think... (CROSS-TALK)

17 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: And one thing that I  
18 wanted to bring up briefly, because you're so  
19 passionate about the RTM and the PTSD stuff, is  
20 actually we're seeing a skyrocketing amount of re-  
21 traumatization because of what's going on in  
22 Washington. In Rochester, a trans veteran completed  
23 suicide at a VA hospital after that announcement by  
24 the Trump Administration. I, as a trans person, am  
25 working daily with our SAGE Vets team to make sure

2 that our trans vets know that they can come to us.

3 And this, because you're so passionate about PTSD, I  
4 wanted to amplify that it's only getting worse.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And that's why we  
6 need additional funding for DVS and all the programs,  
7 and that's why I'm not asking for a lot of money just  
8 for a pilot program that probably would work for most  
9 veterans, and in a short period of time. Because that  
10 could save a life, and that could save a family's  
11 existence. Because that's why it's so important to  
12 reinvest in our DVS now. But thank you, Brian, for  
13 all your work on the front lines again.

14 PETER KEMPNER: Good afternoon, Chair  
15 Holden. My name is Peter Kempner. I'm the Legal  
16 Director at Volunteers of Legal Service. Our purpose  
17 is to leverage private attorneys to provide free  
18 legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill  
19 the justice gap.

20 The VOLS Veterans Initiative focuses on  
21 providing free legal services to veterans age 60 and  
22 over, focused on end-of-life and incapacity planning,  
23 allowing them to age in place with dignity and  
24 respect in their community. We provide them with last  
25 wills and testaments, powers of attorney, healthcare

2 proxies, living wills, and other advanced directives.

3 These documents enable our clients to ensure that

4 their dying wishes are fulfilled and that they are

5 able to maintain income and services during their

6 lifetime. We also enable our clients' caregivers to

7 make medical decisions in line with their beliefs.

8 Our guides, fact sheets, workshops, and trainings are

9 aimed at overcoming confusion about planning for the

10 future. And through this work, we empower older

11 veterans to take charge of their finances, property,

12 and medical care, helping them continue to live in

13 the communities for as long as possible. Every year

14 since 1994, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

15 conducts a survey in which participants rank the

16 needs of homeless veterans in the community. This is

17 called the Challenge Survey, and this past year it

18 found that six out of the ten highest unmet needs for

19 veterans were legal in nature. And so ensuring that

20 there's access to free legal services for veterans,

21 active duty service members, and their families is of

22 utmost importance. Last year, the City Council

23 dedicated 600,000 dollars for its Legal Services for

24 Veterans Initiative to help bridge the access to

25 justice gap for our City's veteran community. The

2 organizations that receive this funding provide a  
3 wide range of legal services, and it (TIMER CHIME) is  
4 of utmost importance that that funding remain in  
5 place in the upcoming Fiscal Year. The amount of  
6 funding dedicated to providing free legal services to  
7 veterans is small but critical, and we would just  
8 like to thank the Council for its past support for  
9 this initiative and hope that that money is restored  
10 in this coming Fiscal Year.. (CROSS-TALK)

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But as veterans,  
12 again, the age is, you know, we're getting to a point  
13 where more veterans are getting to a point where  
14 they're seniors, like me, and certainly the Vietnam  
15 veterans are aging. You would need more money than  
16 600,000. I mean, I don't know how 600,000 goes a long  
17 way for legal.

18 PETER KEMPNER: It certainly doesn't,  
19 Chair Holden, and we would welcome an increase..  
20 (CROSS-TALK)

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But do you run out of  
22 funding?

23 PETER KEMPNER: Oh yeah. I mean, this  
24 doesn't cover the services that we provide. We hobble  
25 it together from private foundations, private donors,

2 our law firm partners, State funding, and so the  
3 ability to have more funding would really enhance the  
4 services that us and the other legal services  
5 providers that receive this funding.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So how much do you  
7 need? How much do you need to...

8 PETER KEMPNER: I mean, we would love to  
9 see the money doubled or tripled. I mean... (CROSS-  
10 TALK)

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I want OMB, I want  
12 people to hear this, and it shouldn't only come from  
13 the Council. We should actually fund a program like  
14 this on a regular basis to the tune of well over a  
15 million, I would think.

16 PETER KEMPNER: I absolutely agree.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: As our veterans get  
18 older, and we've seen that.

19 PETER KEMPNER: Yes, and this year marks  
20 the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War,  
21 and so the youngest of the Vietnam era veterans are  
22 in their late 60s at this point.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But your organization  
24 probably does more than just legal. I mean, you're  
25 there for the veteran, right? I mean, you do talk

2 about their lives, their wishes, their families,  
3 right? I mean, you listen to the veterans, so it's a  
4 much more important service than just legal. I know  
5 that's your goal, but you have to actually listen to  
6 a lot more from the veterans to make them feel  
7 comfortable (CROSS-TALK)

8 PETER KEMPNER: Yes. There is a counseling  
9 process. This is not something that's easy to do,  
10 right?

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

12 PETER KEMPNER: Especially when somebody  
13 is in their later years, because you're really asking  
14 them to face their mortality..

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

16 PETER KEMPNER: And those are difficult  
17 conversations, and it's difficult for our clients to  
18 put that signature on the piece of paper, and it is  
19 important that we do that in a culturally competent  
20 and trauma-informed and sensitive way.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, again, for  
22 all your work. Thanks. Joe.

23 JOE BELLO: Before I begin, I just wanted  
24 to say I'm one of those veterans who protested for  
25 this agency over a decade ago, and real quick about

2 that. The Commissioner had stated in his testimony  
3 that there's still a young agency, but next year will  
4 be a decade, and in November or December 1st, he'll  
5 be the Commissioner for five years so at what point  
6 do we start to say we're still young, or we should  
7 have grown? So, I think that I just wanted to make  
8 that point before I started.

9 Chairman Holden, Members of the Veterans  
10 Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify  
11 at today's preliminary budget hearing. Last year,  
12 Finance Chair Justin Brannan stated the budget was  
13 more than simply a financial plan and a list of  
14 expenditures. It is our City's statement of values.  
15 It shows the rest of the world what the greatest city  
16 on the planet cares about. Yet as we review the  
17 Fiscal Year '26 Preliminary Budget, it's clear that  
18 DVS remains stagnant, its headcount basically  
19 unchanged, and its budget roughly 494,000 less than  
20 the Fiscal Year '25 adopted budget. The  
21 Administration's continued lack of investment is  
22 unacceptable, and our community deserves better.  
23 However, with this potentially being the final budget  
24 under this Administration, a funding increase seems  
25 highly unlikely, and I think we need to be honest

1 about that. Therefore, my primary concern are the  
2 strain on DVS staff and the agency's continued lack  
3 of communication and transparency. As I've shared  
4 with elected officials across the five boroughs, they  
5 often seem to know more about what's happening at the  
6 agency and what's coming than the community does. The  
7 lack of transparency is especially troubling  
8 regarding veteran resources. Over a year ago, the  
9 Council passed a Mental Health Roadmap for Veterans.  
10 Local Law 38 required DVS, in coordination with the  
11 Office of Community Mental Health and other  
12 designated agencies, to conduct outreach on veteran  
13 mental health resources (TIMER CHIME) via social  
14 media, radio, print, and digital platforms. We have  
15 yet to see that action besides a few Instagram posts.  
16 Additionally, Local Law 37 required DVS to compile  
17 survey data from City agencies and report to the  
18 Speaker. This report was due on December 15th, and  
19 I'm a little confused at how this report that was by  
20 the agencies needed to be done through VetConnect.  
21 Speaking of VetConnect, VetConnect is intended to  
22 connect veterans with services through a network of  
23 providers, including the VA, government agencies, and  
24 non-profit partners. Yet questions remain about the  
25

2 platform's effectiveness and the transparency of the  
3 data DVS collects. Nearly a year ago, Unite Us was  
4 removed as the platform provider without any public  
5 explanation, and a negotiated acquisition contract  
6 was awarded to a Texas-based non-profit called  
7 Combined Arms. However, DVS failed in its due  
8 diligence to assure that Combined Arms had an  
9 appropriate platform to operate VetConnect, forcing  
10 the agency to currently rely on a makeshift solution  
11 akin to Google Docs, which undermines the program's  
12 intended report. As a result, Combined Arms, as we've  
13 heard, is now developing that platform, while no  
14 Local Law 215 reports have been posted on DVS's site  
15 for either July 2024 or January 2025.

16 Mission VetCheck. Last week, during  
17 Mental Health Week, the Administration issued a press  
18 release stating that between November 2023 and June  
19 2024, DVS contacted 10,000 veterans through Mission  
20 VetCheck. However, given the agency's limited staff  
21 and resources, as well as the scale of outreach  
22 within that timeframe, it was highly unlikely that  
23 DVS made those calls. It was far more plausible that  
24 NY Cares and its volunteers conducted that outreach.  
25 Notably, the press release highlights more than 400

2 referrals, but doesn't specify, and it was not  
3 specified in the testimony either, to what those  
4 veterans were referred to, the impact of those  
5 referrals, or what services were provided. While  
6 Mission VetCheck connects veterans to resources, this  
7 lack of transparency is concerning, and I am  
8 concerned that DVS may use these numbers to inflate  
9 its reporting, particularly through the MMR. To be  
10 clear, Mission VetCheck is a referral program, not a  
11 mental health service, and while 10,000 veterans may  
12 have been contacted, the actual effectiveness of  
13 these referrals remain unclear.

14 I'm getting to the end. While I have  
15 always supported increased funding for veteran  
16 services, I cannot, in good conscience, support or  
17 endorse another year of funding for we in the  
18 community are referred to as the Paul Vallone  
19 Initiative, i.e. the Veteran Resource Centers. Paul  
20 was a good friend for many years, and I believe he  
21 would be disappointed at how this funding has been  
22 managed. Moreover, the Council's Veterans Initiative  
23 only saw a 30,000-dollar increase for Fiscal Year  
24 '25. The allocation is roughly 2.8 million in  
25 discretionary funding across five initiatives,

2 continues to be insufficient. I would urge this  
3 Committee and the Council's BMT to redirect the  
4 majority of the monies for next, for if it's up there  
5 for Fiscal Year '26, to significantly increase the  
6 Council's Veterans Initiative.

7           Finally, for several years now, I've  
8 listened to DVS tout its accomplishments, but once  
9 again it's disheartening to see little tangible  
10 results. The agency continues to lack communication,  
11 transparency, context, and measurable outcomes across  
12 its programs, whether it's the resource guides,  
13 disability claims, including the number of successful  
14 claims that they've done since 2020, the DRIER  
15 program, the VSO building violations, Covered Vet  
16 NYC, the DEW program, transitioning servicemen, and  
17 even the post 9/11 fall of service memorial. Three  
18 years into this Administration, the veterans  
19 community remains an afterthought reduced to  
20 handshakes, optics, and half-hearted measures.

21           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I saw you, Joe, I saw  
22 you shaking your head during the Joseph P. Dwyer  
23 program. Could you elaborate on that a little bit,  
24 like why you're skeptical, and how much should we  
25 give a pass to DVS because their budget is

2 inadequate? So, I mean, it's kind of like they're  
3 maybe stuck between a rock and a hard place.

4           JOE BELLO: But I think if they're stuck  
5 between a rock and a hard place, then we as a  
6 community and the Council, even the Administration,  
7 needs to have an honest conversation about what  
8 actually DVS can do and can't do. Over the past five  
9 years, the current Commissioner has added on programs  
10 after programs after programs, and what we wind up  
11 seeing is people wind up being stressed out and  
12 leaving. And it's not like he's telling us. We hear  
13 it in the community. So, I think we would have to  
14 talk about a DVS 2.0 and what that would look like  
15 and what, in reality, if that funding is not going to  
16 change, what can DVS take on? And I go back to Laurie  
17 Sutton's days when she used to say DVS was supposed  
18 to be the spoke in a wheel to refer to services. So,  
19 I think we have to have that conversation, and I  
20 think that's probably going to come in the next  
21 Administration (CROSS-TALK)

22           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) does stop  
23 with the Mayor. The Mayor can put a few more million  
24 into their budget so they can communicate a little

2 bit and to do the things that you said they should be  
3 doing.

4 JOE BELLO: I agree. I mean, I wrote up, I  
5 wrote up.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Is there a  
7 coincidence that the veteran, DVS, is the smallest  
8 budget of any City agency in this Administration?

9 JOE BELLO: Yeah.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And the Mayor did  
11 say, when I brought this up at a budget hearing with  
12 him, and I'll say this on a stack of Bibles, anybody  
13 wants to listen, he did say we shouldn't have to do  
14 the work, the City should not have to do the work of  
15 the VA, which I thought is, is ridiculous.

16 JOE BELLO: Yeah, that's a horrible  
17 answer.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. (CROSS-TALK)

19 JOE BELLO: (INAUDIBLE)

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't think he  
21 understood how horrible it sounded.

22 JOE BELLO: And what confuses me, and I'll  
23 say this for the record too, is that this Mayor, and  
24 even as the Commissioner has highlighted it, he was  
25 the Chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the

2 New York State Senate so it's not like he didn't have  
3 any kind of understanding around veterans and its  
4 issues.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

6 JOE BELLO: So, for him to say that is, is  
7 just, is, I think it's disrespectful, and it's  
8 disappointing.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And we're not asking  
10 the DVS to do the work of the VA. We're asking them  
11 to communicate, to try to fill a need that New York  
12 City veterans have, and it's communication. We're not  
13 asking for like 500 million dollars here. We're  
14 asking for a few more million to make this agency  
15 work better. And adding a few million out of a budget  
16 of 109 billion is a drop in the bucket.

17 JOE BELLO: No, I agree. I mean, think  
18 about it this way. When we went through the pandemic  
19 and Mission VetCheck first started, you know, even  
20 today the Commissioner testified about the, what our  
21 demographics look like in the city, correct? We have,  
22 we are an aging veteran population, and so at some  
23 point we're going to have to have a conversation  
24 about what that looks like, not only with the  
25

2 Department of the Aging, but you know, other agencies  
3 as well, and he's just not doing that at all.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The Mayor's financial  
5 people should be telling them that if we get more  
6 money, millions more for veterans in this city who  
7 deserve it, who have it coming to them, they would  
8 actually increase the economy of New York City to  
9 benefit so it's a small investment, and it would pay  
10 off in dividends.

11 JOE BELLO: And I agree, because I would  
12 say to you that one of the things we say, and we used  
13 to say it in the Veterans Advisory Board as well, is  
14 that New York City has the resources, but they need  
15 to be better funded, but we are not veteran friendly.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

17 JOE BELLO: I mean a city of 8.3 million  
18 people with, you know, if you go by the  
19 Commissioner's 200,000 number, even though I disagree  
20 with that, but they're a needle in a haystack, and a  
21 lot of the Administration has just forgotten about  
22 that.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

24 JOE BELLO: You asked me about Dwyer.

25 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: Can I make one...

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, Brian just  
3 wanted to say.

4 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: I'm sorry. Can I  
5 make one suggestion? I know the budget's limited, and  
6 so is our time, but might I suggest that you and  
7 Chair Hudson have a joint hearing for Aging and  
8 Veterans together (CROSS-TALK)

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, we requested,  
10 yeah.

11 BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: Because she is also  
12 facing, we at SAGE also advocated that our centers  
13 need 10 million dollars to prevent almost 60 of them  
14 for closing this year, and I think the way that the  
15 aging population of veterans, and the aging  
16 population of just your everyday New Yorker, need to  
17 come together.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. We did have a  
19 conversation on that already so we are planning that  
20 in the future, but thank you for that. Yes.

21 Do you want to?

22 JOE BELLO: Well, just regarding Dwyer,  
23 because you asked. So, you know, the Commissioner's  
24 testified it several times over the years. I've gone  
25 back over that testimony about in Fiscal Year 2022,

2 the program received 150,000. It increased to  
3 400,000, and this Fiscal Year for the State, it's  
4 510,000. So, I think the problem we've kind of been  
5 having listening to the Commissioner and having  
6 conversations in the community is there seems to be a  
7 lot more money going into overhead than to actual  
8 programming. No money has gone out. Let's be clear  
9 about that. He keeps saying the money's coming, but  
10 no money has gone out, and I think the lack of  
11 communication and transparency from the person he has  
12 running that program, and we've had this conversation  
13 before, by the way, I think is appalling. So, you  
14 have a lot of these not-for-profits and groups out  
15 there that are willing to do this work, and yet  
16 there's no communication, and so I think that there's  
17 been no explanation for the delays, nor why some  
18 organizations are being asked to accept less funding  
19 than originally requested. Furthermore, we didn't  
20 even get, and the Commissioner testified about this,  
21 we didn't even get an update on the status of the  
22 four pilot programs that they operated. I mean, one  
23 of them we know was tile remediation at an American  
24 Legion post in Southeast Queens. How is that peer-to-  
25 peer? So, I mean, again, I am very concerned. I've

2 actually asked if we can hold a separate hearing on  
3 this specifically and bring in some of these, the  
4 vendors that applied, and I'd like to ask, and I know  
5 you don't (INAUDIBLE), but I'd like to see the  
6 Comptroller audit this program, and for the State  
7 Senator to hold a hearing on it.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, thank you  
9 again. Thank you to this panel. Excellent testimony.  
10 Thanks so much. And thank you for staying this long  
11 and sticking it out.

12 The next panel is Alicia Kershaw, Coco  
13 Culhane, Contessa Officer, and Eric Lee.

14 Alicia, Alicia Kershaw. Yes. Thank you  
15 again for staying this long and waiting.

16 ALICIA KERSHAW: Thank you for staying.  
17 I'd like to thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I have to stay.

19 ALICIA KERSHAW: I guess I do too,  
20 actually. Thank you for your support and for giving  
21 me the opportunity to speak. I'm here on behalf of  
22 GallopNYC, a therapeutic horseback riding program  
23 that works with people with disabilities, including  
24 veterans. We have wide-ranging programs which are  
25 described in our written testimony. Horses and

2 people, actually military horses and people, have a  
3 very long history, and we tap into that deeply rooted  
4 relationship to help veterans. We have a 2,000-person  
5 wait list. Many, many of them are veterans. We get  
6 calls from veterans weekly. We prioritize veterans  
7 when we schedule programming. We're fortunate to have  
8 support of the City Council, and we've applied for  
9 funding from Dwyer, and I would like to say without  
10 getting into the prior panel, but I know what it's  
11 like to run an under-resourced agency.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But did you say you  
13 had 2,000-person wait lists?

14 ALICIA KERSHAW: 2,000, not all of the  
15 veterans.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Oh, okay.

17 ALICIA KERSHAW: I don't think our  
18 veterans wait list is very long, because we do make  
19 an effort to bring them in.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You give them a  
21 priority?

22 ALICIA KERSHAW: Yeah. Our veterans work  
23 is an example of mental health work that's a growing  
24 area for us. Just this month, we received permission  
25 to directly employ mental health licensed

2 professionals, and so we are working hard to continue  
3 to expand our services for veterans. We also are  
4 working on research. I don't know if the RTM would  
5 fit into our program, but I'm definitely going to  
6 look into it because I do agree that there's not  
7 enough out there that works for veterans, and we do  
8 have something we feel works, so we're trying to  
9 prove that through research. It's one of our goals.  
10 We are working with the VA now. We get referrals, and  
11 we are working with an in-house substance abuse rehab  
12 group, which has been very, very, very successful.  
13 (TIMER CHIME) I had a little anecdote, but I'll save  
14 it.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Finish it, yeah.

16 ALICIA KERSHAW: Well, another way we're  
17 expanding with veterans and their families. We have a  
18 veteran named Juan Tarona (phonetic), who rides with  
19 us with his family, and he spoke at our gala about  
20 how important it was to be riding with his family and  
21 have an opportunity to reconnect with his family.  
22 He's done, I think it's two tours, two or three tours  
23 overseas, and he's very, very grateful for the  
24 opportunity that we provide to bond with his family  
25 through our horse program.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Did he tell you how  
3 it helped him, like certainly bond with his family,  
4 become a more well-rounded person, connect with, you  
5 know, obviously the horses?

6 ALICIA KERSHAW: I think, yes, and a lot  
7 of it is, I think there's two main pieces of it. One  
8 is spending time with his family in an activity that  
9 they all can enjoy, but the other is that time with  
10 horses opens people up, and I think he finds it  
11 easier to communicate with his family when he's had  
12 his time with horses.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's great. Thank  
14 you. Thank you for your testimony.

15 ALICIA KERSHAW: Thank you.

16 CONTESSA OFFICER: Good afternoon, Chair  
17 Holden and Members of the New York City Council  
18 Committee on Veterans. My name is Contessa Officer,  
19 and I am the Director of Veterans Program for VNS  
20 Health. I am also a veteran. I served in the U.S.  
21 Army Reserves and National Guard. Thank you for this  
22 opportunity to testify.

23 In Fiscal Year 2024, the VNS Health  
24 Veterans Program offered services to over 1,500 New  
25 York City veterans or veteran family members. We are

2 the largest hospice and home health service provider  
3 to veterans in New York City. The VNS Health Veterans  
4 Program is unique in that we focus on reducing social  
5 determinants of health through increasing veterans'  
6 and their families' access to quality healthcare  
7 options in the home and community, while at the same  
8 time connecting them to additional benefits available  
9 through the VA, such as home health aid hours,  
10 durable medical equipment, and benefits for veterans'  
11 spouses and dependents. The program also refers  
12 veterans to community-based resources, such as  
13 supportive housing, transportation, and educates  
14 clinicians on veteran issues, such as suicide  
15 prevention. Our veteran team members visit veterans  
16 in their homes to recognize their military service,  
17 work with their healthcare team, and provide support  
18 to families as they navigate the VA benefits process.  
19 We are grateful for the 170,000 we received in City  
20 Council discretionary funds for Fiscal Year 2025. In  
21 this upcoming year, we are seeking 500,000 to expand  
22 outreach and connect more veterans to care. This  
23 year, the Veterans Program began a partnership with  
24 the New York City Department of Veterans Services to  
25 provide more veterans access to healthcare services.

2 This new partnership will require additional funding  
3 to support veterans across New York City referred to  
4 the VNS Health Veterans Program. Veterans will  
5 receive individualized support (TIMER CHIME) from  
6 healthcare professionals to include services from our  
7 Care Management Program and/or health plan. Thank you  
8 again for this opportunity to testify. We appreciate  
9 the City Council's leadership on veteran issues and  
10 offer our ongoing partnership in collaboration.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Contessa.

12 By the way, you said you served 1,500 veterans.

13 CONTESSA OFFICER: Yes.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: With a funding of  
15 170,000.

16 CONTESSA OFFICER: Yes. We make it work.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't know how. So  
18 how many could you serve for 500,000?

19 CONTESSA OFFICER: I would say we could  
20 serve, you know, double that. You know, we have a  
21 small team of five. However, we're tenacious, we're  
22 ambitious, and we're always looking at ways to be  
23 more effective. We reach out to all the veterans that  
24 are identified at VNS Health. We call them, we speak  
25 with either the veteran or their caregiver, and we

2 really assess what their needs are, not just  
3 connecting them to the VA, but to healthcare, right?  
4 So if we had more funding, we would be able to build  
5 our team, we would be able to do more projects, we go  
6 to the homes, we have care packages that we give to  
7 the veterans, we spend time with them, but we're such  
8 a small team that we can't do that, you know, in the  
9 capacity that we would want to.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it's obvious.

11 CONTESSA OFFICER: So the will is there,  
12 we just need the money.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Show me the money,  
14 right.

15 CONTESSA OFFICER: Show me the money.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, again, with all  
17 the wide-ranging services you're offering our  
18 veterans, it seems to me like a good investment.

19 CONTESSA OFFICER: Absolutely. It's the  
20 best investment, and the veterans would say so as  
21 well. They cannot believe that when they're getting  
22 healthcare, somebody actually cares about the fact  
23 that they were a veteran.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Well, thank  
25 you, again, for your service. Thanks.

2           COCO CULHANE: Hi. Coco Culhane from the  
3 Veteran Advocacy Project. I'm going to go off script  
4 a bit. I just wanted to say the changes at the VA  
5 haven't really happened yet, so any shortages that  
6 were being referred to are existing problems, right.  
7 I mean, they laid off 1,900 people, and some 1,600  
8 have been reinstated, and I don't know how much  
9 that's impacting our local facilities, but, you know,  
10 some of it is also that they're coming back to work,  
11 and there's just chaos, right, so if that's happening  
12 already, imagine if they lay off, you know, 18  
13 percent of the workforce, and it's going to be up to  
14 the local community to step in and take care of those  
15 veterans, and to provide those services. The other  
16 thing on the federal level is, so much of this  
17 funding is just up in the air, and nobody knows.  
18 Right now, we're waiting to find out, like, are we  
19 going to have to, you know, downsize, and so much of  
20 legal services funding is federal, and it's a scary  
21 time. So, I think that hasn't happened yet. Well,  
22 that's not true, immigration and fair housing, but I  
23 think the point is that we need to be prepared for a  
24 crisis in the services in the city, because really,  
25 we're federally funded. A lot of this work.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, we know they're  
3 not expanding Veterans Affairs, and so there has to  
4 be an impact down the line certainly, and was the VA  
5 ever operating like it should? You know, that's  
6 another thing, because there has been, you know,  
7 horror stories that we're hearing years ago, even, so  
8 if they cut the agency, even by 10 percent, there's  
9 going to be a ripple effect down the line so that's  
10 why we need to (TIMER CHIME) all of us, and you know,  
11 we need to increase more the not-for-profit services  
12 that is being, obviously, are being offered to our  
13 veterans, and thank you, again, for being on the  
14 front line of your work for so long. But go ahead, if  
15 you have some additional.

16 COCO CULHANE: Yeah. I just wanted to add  
17 a couple more things. You know, all of the  
18 elimination of DEI programs, the elimination, you  
19 know, the Pentagon took down all of the pages that  
20 were about Black service members and women, and you  
21 know, there's public outcry, and they put most of it  
22 back. But one of the biggest reasons that we see  
23 people coming to us for discharge upgrades is  
24 systemic racism, and so if we are, you know, if there  
25 was an era where this was being integrated into

2 military service, and we were still seeing a huge  
3 need, it's kind of scary to think, well, if there's  
4 basically a green light for people to abuse power,  
5 and is what, you know, I think it looks like for the  
6 military right now. And you know, the number one tool  
7 that we have with discharge upgrades is this thing  
8 called the Kurta Memo, and it basically, you know,  
9 says that the boards have to consider mental health  
10 conditions or trauma that may have impacted someone's  
11 behavior. And it's just been taken down from the  
12 website. And so again, it's something that's totally  
13 up in the air and could be fine, but the need there  
14 is already so huge. We have a wait list. We're so  
15 grateful for the City and our partnership with DVS,  
16 because that funding has allowed us to chisel away at  
17 the wait list.

18           And then just wanted to say, in terms of  
19 benefits, I think there's so many VSOs that have  
20 downsized, and so many VSO offices that have closed.  
21 We used to have something like nine right on  
22 (INAUDIBLE) so funding more counselors to do appeals,  
23 applications, whatever it is, I think is vital, and I  
24 think we need to be looking at the data. You know,  
25 these numbers can go all over the place, and I think

2 we need to have data in order to understand the need.  
3 What I saw is that New York is actually right at the  
4 national average, that there's about 29 percent of  
5 vets who are service-connected. So, whether or not,  
6 but regardless, there's always more we can do, and  
7 there's a huge wait for these VSO services. And then  
8 my testimony, written testimony, includes suggestions  
9 and things like coordination between SSVF programs  
10 and HRA on one-shots, and things like that that are  
11 not costly and could make a difference in the way  
12 that we, as a community, serve veterans.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, but, you know,  
14 again, I've been talking about, because I have a lot  
15 of VSOs in my District, and Queens essentially has a  
16 lot, I think, I mean, compared to the other boroughs,  
17 but we're seeing them close, but I think many of our  
18 City leaders don't understand the importance of the  
19 VSOs, that it is so important to a veteran to have  
20 some mentorship through the VSOs, to come together  
21 and talk about the issues, and many of them are not  
22 even recognizing they have PTSD and how the VSOs are  
23 helping them with that, and we've seen it over and  
24 over again so that's why I called on the City Council  
25 to try to fund some Member item initiatives to give

2 each Council Member, 51 Council Members, money to  
3 allocate to VSOs. And there's always been a question,  
4 well, where do we allocate it to? And we could  
5 allocate it to Washington, even, to the VA. It  
6 doesn't have to go to DVS, but if it went to DVS, so  
7 be it. But I think we need to have that, that  
8 conversation. We haven't had it yet so I haven't been  
9 very successful at that.

10 COCO CULHANE: And I just want to also  
11 point out, there's a difference though, between those  
12 posts that are, I think, you said mentorship, and  
13 more social. They're not doing benefits claims,  
14 right? So, I was only referencing... (CROSS-TALK)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, I know, but I  
16 broadened it, but it's very, very important to issue  
17 some defense of VSOs because every year we lose a few  
18 more, but thank you, thank you, Coco. Eric.

19 ERIC LEE: Hi. Good afternoon. Thank you,  
20 Chair Holden, and Members of the Committee for  
21 allowing me to testify today. I'm Eric Lee. I'm the  
22 Director of Public Policy and Volunteers of America  
23 Greater New York, a 129-year-old anti-poverty  
24 organization, which serves over 750 veterans every  
25 year. We're one of the largest supportive housing

2 providers for veterans in New York City, and we're  
3 also proud of our involvement in the City's  
4 initiative to successfully end chronic homelessness  
5 among veterans. I will submit written testimony, but  
6 I'll summarize that today.

7           So, thank you, Chair Holden, and members  
8 of the Committee for, and the entire City Council,  
9 for your unwavering leadership and commitment to  
10 supporting veterans who served our country. We're  
11 extremely grateful for the Council's steadfast  
12 support of VOA-GNY through the Veterans Community  
13 Development Citywide Initiative, and we're seeking  
14 this Committee's support in our funding renewal  
15 request for FY26. Given the growing uncertainty in  
16 the federal government, which we've heard about  
17 today, the funding for the Council, which is provided  
18 by the Council for this initiative, is even more  
19 critical to enriching the lives of the veterans which  
20 we serve. We use this funding to enhance services for  
21 veterans within our citywide VA-funded SSVF program,  
22 as well as veterans housed within our multiple  
23 permanent housing supportive sites. This includes art  
24 therapies, which you, Chair Holden, championed as an  
25 extremely impactful source of therapy for both the

2 mental and emotional well-being of veterans. Through  
3 this initiative, we also connect veterans to  
4 employment and training opportunities in high-demand  
5 fields like transportation, healthcare, and  
6 construction. We also are seeking an expansion of  
7 funding this year from 74,000 to 100,000 to be able  
8 to help veterans cover costs for things related to  
9 training and employment, as well as housing  
10 placements and basic needs, as well as enriching  
11 therapeutic programming, education, and recreational  
12 services (TIMER CHIME) at our congregate supportive  
13 housing sites, which have set-asides for veterans.  
14 Mind if I make two more points?

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Go ahead.

16 ERIC LEE: Thank you. So, thank you, Chair  
17 Holden and Council Member Nurse for co-sponsoring  
18 Intro. 29, and we urge the Committee to join in  
19 advocating for the passage of this legislation, which  
20 would provide training for first responders to  
21 recognize the signs of traumatic brain injury, or  
22 TBI, in survivors of domestic violence. Veterans and  
23 survivors both disproportionately suffer from TBIs,  
24 and while the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
25 does mandatory screenings, there is no comparable

2 screening for survivors, and wider training and  
3 screening would help both populations. We would also  
4 welcome your leadership in prioritizing funding so  
5 that first responders in the FY26 budget have funding  
6 available to train them on TBI, ensuring that they  
7 have tools needed to save lives.

8           And my last point is we support veterans  
9 and others in institutional settings, and we applaud  
10 Council Member Paladino for championing Reso 16 of  
11 2024, which would increase the personal needs  
12 allowance, putting more money in the pockets of  
13 deserving Americans. Thank you.

14           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Eric.  
15 You're not asking for a lot of money. You're asking  
16 for an increase of from 74 to 100,000, which is, how  
17 many veterans do you serve?

18           ERIC LEE: Over 750. So, the way that we  
19 use the funding, we hire a part-time coordinator  
20 within our SSVF program who connects veterans to  
21 different resources, and then the other funding  
22 that's left over after funding that staff position,  
23 we use to layer on to our other programs where we  
24 house veterans in our supportive housing sites.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's money well  
3 spent, so thank you, Eric. Thank you for your  
4 testimony. Thank you all.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Next panel is Michael  
6 Inyosu and Sharon Brown. Michael, did I pronounce  
7 your name right, correctly? No? All right, thank you.

8 MICHAEL INYOSU: I have to say it's an  
9 honor to be here. I just wanted to bring out  
10 something is that I know that you've been very  
11 helpful to veterans for many years, and I was hoping  
12 to thank the other co-sponsors of the Cold War  
13 property tax exemption, and I was going to ask  
14 Councilwoman Sandra, can't think of her last name,  
15 Nurse, to see if she could also co-sponsor the bill.  
16 We lost Council Member Borelli for his resignation,  
17 so there's only eight left, and I feel that it's very  
18 important to me that I was a honorable discharge from  
19 '75 to '79 on an aircraft carrier, the CVN Kennedy,  
20 and when I call up to try to get a property tax  
21 exemption for the Cold War veterans, they do not  
22 consider me a veteran, and I know you're big on co-  
23 sponsoring that for a while, Chair Holden, and I  
24 wanted to see if I can. I'm trying to do this for  
25 like seven years, and with DVS as part of it for them

2 to put that out, where it would be, I pay 6,000  
3 dollars property tax. It would be a 600-dollar-per-  
4 year savings for me and my wife on a fixed income,  
5 coming up on our 50th anniversary. I missed it by two  
6 weeks. I joined prior to the Vietnam era. No, no,  
7 that's fine. I'm very thankful for everything that we  
8 do for our veterans. This is something that would  
9 affect me, and I'll expect yes, no, or maybe, and  
10 we've been trying for many years for this. So, for  
11 600 dollars, it (TIMER CHIME) would give me and my  
12 wife 50 per month towards groceries or things. It's  
13 not a lot of money. If I move now, because of the  
14 rate of inflation and things, so if I move one block  
15 out of New York City, this is already a New York  
16 State law. I move one block out, I get it. So, the  
17 simple, there's five, I think, words. New York City,  
18 please opt in to this program. We have that  
19 alternative that the Commissioner was mentioning.  
20 There's a couple of them. I didn't use any loans, so  
21 I am looking, I am trying to be a voice for the Cold  
22 War veterans that are out there. There's probably not  
23 many of us here, but I want to be a voice where I  
24 want to be recognized for my service for those four  
25 years where we practiced for war, and I'm a veteran.

2 And Governor Cuomo, at the time, it took three times  
3 for him to recognize City workers to buy back their  
4 pension time of three years that cost me 10,000  
5 dollars, which is well worth it, my pension. But he  
6 said that a veteran is a veteran, and when it comes  
7 to Cold War veterans, you're telling, not you, sir,  
8 they're telling me that you're not, Mike, you're not.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN; Right. And again,  
10 it's not a lot of money that we're talking about.  
11 Even to the City, we're not talking about the City  
12 losing money, a lot of money, on you saving 600  
13 dollars... (CROSS-TALK)

14 MICHAEL INYOSU: 10 years.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. So, it's not a  
16 lot of money. And how many years did you serve on the  
17 aircraft carrier?

18 MICHAEL INYOSU: Four years, '75 to '79.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Four years.

20 MICHAEL INYOSU: Yes, yes sir.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what type of work  
22 did you do?

23 MICHAEL INYOSU: I was a jet engine  
24 mechanic.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, you probably  
3 experiencing some hearing loss too, probably.

4 MICHAEL INYOSU: Actually, for some  
5 reason, I never did.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know people that  
7 served on aircraft carriers.

8 MICHAEL INYOSU: Yes, and I worked with  
9 the subways, but no, I haven't.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You didn't? You're  
11 lucky, you're very lucky.

12 MICHAEL INYOSU: No, no, very lucky.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Doesn't mean in the  
14 future you won't have it, but hopefully we'll keep  
15 offering.

16 MICHAEL INYOSU: We're just trying to  
17 recognize Cold War... (CROSS-TALK)

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Four years should be  
19 worth a tax exemption. I mean, that's what we're  
20 talking about here.

21 MICHAEL INYOSU: I'm sorry to interrupt,  
22 it's like that's 600 dollars equates to the 6,000  
23 that I pay. It would give me one year of property tax  
24 exemption for those ten years, and then it ends. So,  
25 I just want to recognize the Cold War veterans.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. And you're 100  
3 percent, that's why we have the bill, and that's why  
4 hopefully this Council will pass it, but thank you  
5 again, Michael. Thank you.

6 MICHAEL INYOSU: Thank you.

7 SHARON BROWN: Hello. My name is Sharon  
8 Brown from Rose of Sharon Enterprises. Before I  
9 begin, remember the hostages, release the hostages,  
10 let Yahweh's people go, defend Israel.

11 Okay. The veteran budget should be one of  
12 the highest budgets there are going into this budget  
13 season. They defend and defended the nation and the  
14 nations around the world. When our veterans were  
15 fighting and our military fight, everyone is safe  
16 around the world because of what they do. They should  
17 not have a problem with housing. They should not have  
18 a problem with businesses. They should not have a  
19 problem getting permits and things to sell on the  
20 streets and things like that, but they should  
21 actually be considered first for business. We need to  
22 have veterans first, where we're considering veterans  
23 first for things. They should be considered for  
24 housing. They should go from street directly into  
25 homes without all of the red tape, all of the

2 qualifications, and they shouldn't have any  
3 qualifications as far as having to be in any kind of  
4 mental health program. They need to get directly into  
5 housing. They shouldn't stop in some kind of program.  
6 Whatever they want to do, not are forced to do,  
7 whatever they want to do with themselves, they can do  
8 it from their own homes, homes and apartments. We  
9 need our military homeless to be in houses. This is a  
10 very important situation. I can no longer stand to  
11 see veterans being abused. Cold War veterans, it's  
12 obscene that any veteran is not considered a veteran  
13 (TIMER CHIME) and they are not first for funding.  
14 Let's take care of our military and our veterans  
15 because they have taken care of us.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you,  
17 Sharon, for your testimony. Thank you both for your  
18 excellent testimony.

19 I'm now going to call on people on Zoom,  
20 on remote.

21 First on Zoom is Cleopatra Brown.  
22 Cleopatra, you have two minutes.

23 DR. CLEOPATRA BROWN: Yes. Good afternoon,  
24 everyone. Can you hear me?

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes, we can hear you.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Good afternoon, Chair  
3 Holden, Councilwoman Sandy, and the Members of the  
4 Committee on Veterans. My name is Dr. Cleopatra  
5 Brown. I am a Cold War veteran with a service-  
6 connected disability. Currently, I serve as the  
7 Chairperson of Community Board 16 Veterans Affairs  
8 Committee. I would like to thank the New York City  
9 Council Committee on Veterans for the opportunity to  
10 speak on behalf of the Community Board 3 and 16  
11 Veterans Committee and those veterans who are unable  
12 to attend this budget hearing. I come before this  
13 Committee to respectfully request that the veterans'  
14 budget be increased for the following reasons. One,  
15 to create City VASH vouchers and hire housing  
16 coordinators to assist veterans with obtaining  
17 vouchers and finding apartments for them before they  
18 face homelessness. No veteran should have to become  
19 homeless in order to receive a housing voucher.  
20 Currently on Housing Connect, residents of community  
21 boards are given a 20 percent preference and the City  
22 employees receive 5 percent preference, while  
23 veterans, those who have served, protected, and  
24 fought for this country receive no preference at all.  
25 Rather than allocating funds to support veterans who

2 have served and fought for this country, the City has  
3 recently increased funding for 2,000 migrants to  
4 receive housing vouchers for all undocumented family  
5 members, regardless of income. Meanwhile, you have  
6 veterans living in shelters are required to work at  
7 least 10 hours per week to qualify for a CityFHEPS  
8 voucher and remain on the waiting list for a HUD-VASH  
9 voucher due to the shortage of case managers.

10 We also need to hire additional staff to  
11 be assigned to non-veteran healthcare facilities,  
12 colleges, veteran organizations, and community board  
13 veterans to identify and assist veterans in obtaining  
14 the necessary benefits, disability compensation,  
15 veteran specific events, and assigned to shelters to  
16 work with the City in locating apartments for  
17 veterans. In the previous Administration, the  
18 engagement community outreach specialist was assigned  
19 to Community Board 3 and 16 to attend meetings,  
20 provide resources, and assist with veterans' events.  
21 It will be a blessing if we can have someone to fill  
22 that position. Also to hire an advertisement and  
23 marketing agency that will conduct direct mailing and  
24 emailing campaigns, create monthly newsletter to  
25 highlight veteran organizations, services, and

2 resources available to veterans, promote veteran-  
3 specific events, and conduct surveys to assess the  
4 needs of veterans in each District. Also to provide  
5 grants to veteran and legal services organization  
6 that assists veterans in submitting and appealing  
7 claims for disability compensation and discharge  
8 upgrades. This assistance is especially important for  
9 those who have been unfairly given other than  
10 honorable or dishonorable discharges.

11 Also to allocate funds to local veteran  
12 organizations such as, but not limited to, the  
13 American Legion Post, the Disabled American Veterans,  
14 the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Black Vets for  
15 Social Justice, and Services for Underserved, just to  
16 name a few, who are providing services to veterans.

17 In addition, providing funding to  
18 community boards with veteran committees to conduct  
19 outreach events aimed at providing veterans with  
20 resources and informing them of the benefits to which  
21 they are entitled.

22 We also respectfully request that the New  
23 York City Council Committee on Veterans establish a  
24 local law to amend the Administrative Code of the New  
25 York City Department of Finance in relation to

2 implementing the Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold  
3 War Veterans under the New York State Property Tax  
4 Law Section 458, the tax exemption..

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you,  
6 Cleopatra. We got to move on. Thank you so much, and  
7 I agree with everything you said. Thank you for your  
8 service to the Community Board, too. Thank you.

9 Our next panelist is Tyler Levsen.

10 Tyler, you have two minutes.

11 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Starting time.

12 TYLER LEVSEN: Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We hear you.

14 TYLER LEVSEN: Okay. Thank you. My name is  
15 Tyler Levsen, and I am a Staff Attorney and Legal  
16 Research Advisor at Family Legal Care, formerly LIFT.  
17 Thank you to Chair Holden and Members of the Veterans  
18 Committee for the opportunity to speak today about  
19 the issues veterans are experiencing in family  
20 courts. I'd also like to thank the City Council for  
21 its continued support, without which we could not  
22 assist veterans and their families to confront issues  
23 at the heart of their well-being, like child support,  
24 custody, and visitation, and domestic violence. Our  
25 work is especially important now, as thousands of

1 veterans have been laid off from their federal jobs,  
2 and the VA faces possible budget cuts, layoffs, and  
3 termination of contracts, affecting the programs that  
4 veterans rely on. We hope you will continue your  
5 support for our essential services and resources for  
6 veterans. Over 80 percent of litigants come to family  
7 court without an attorney, and Family Legal Care is  
8 the only organization dedicated solely to empowering  
9 New Yorkers to represent themselves in family court.  
10 Each year, we help over 28,000 people to self-  
11 advocate for positive outcomes in their child  
12 support, custody, visitation, and domestic violence  
13 cases. Veterans need specialized support to deal with  
14 those issues, as there are unique aspects to their  
15 situation and laws that impact the process and  
16 results for them. For example, most of the veterans  
17 we serve are struggling with child support arrears  
18 from cases that could be modified. This can lead to  
19 enforcement actions against them, such as having  
20 money garnished from their military retirement  
21 pension or VA disability benefits. If the wrong  
22 amount is being collected, or if it is withheld  
23 improperly, this can lead to financial hardship.  
24 Family Legal Care is here to help. My colleagues and  
25

2 I provide one-on-one legal advice consultations, as  
3 well as legal information at the City's courthouses  
4 or through our bilingual helplines. We also conduct  
5 legal education workshops and webinars on common  
6 family law issues for veterans. The court's decisions  
7 touch the lives of thousands of children and families  
8 with profound long-term effects on their safety,  
9 economic security, health, and well-being. The demand  
10 for free expert legal advice has never been greater,  
11 continues to grow, and Family Legal Care is the only  
12 organization in New York City filling this need. With  
13 continued support from the City Council, we continue  
14 to be a part of the solution. Thank you for your  
15 time.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Tyler. Do  
17 you help veterans in Veteran Treatment Court also?

18 TYLER LEVSEN: No, we do not. Our work is  
19 solely focused on family court.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Great. Thank  
21 you so much. Thanks, Tyler. Thanks for your work.

22 Our next panelist is Christopher Leon  
23 Johnson. You have two minutes.

24 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Starting time.

2 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: My name is  
3 Christopher Leon Johnson, and I'm in the Bronx right  
4 now. I just came from a women's empowerment event. I  
5 wanted to tell the City Council to please allocate  
6 money to the Worker Justice Project and to the Street  
7 Vendor Project, because they are the two  
8 organizations that work with veterans. They have  
9 veterans in the committee and the organization that  
10 deliver food and serve our people with mangoes and  
11 stuff like that, aAnd yeah, serve our mangoes and  
12 stuff like that. At the same time, the City Council  
13 needs to protect our veterans, serve our veterans. We  
14 need to love our veterans for what they do, but at  
15 the same time, they need to really protect our  
16 veterans, you know what I'm saying? Veterans Affairs  
17 matters in 2025, and I'm kind of busy right now in  
18 the Bronx, but yeah, like I said, preserve the  
19 funding for the Worker Justice Project and the Street  
20 Vendor Project, protect our veterans, house our  
21 veterans.

22 Thank you, Chair Holden, for serving us  
23 for the past eight years as a Council Member, and I  
24 know this is your final budget hearing, pre-budget  
25 hearing for your tenure, and I'm going to miss you,

2 bro, so I'm kind of busy right now, but like I said,  
3 protect our vendors, protect our street vendors,  
4 protect our deliveristas, protect our veterans,  
5 allocate, make sure they get over 1 million dollars  
6 in funding. We need the deliverista hub outside City  
7 Hall. Like I said, this year, veterans should be  
8 prioritized over everybody else because they serve  
9 our country. You might not like their politics, you  
10 might love their politics, but they serve our  
11 country. They did something that I'm too scared to  
12 do, I know a lot of us are scared to do, and they  
13 serve our country, and you know, and so God bless our  
14 veterans, God bless our veterans 2025, and yeah, I'm  
15 in the Bronx right now, so yeah, but thanks for  
16 hosting here, Mr. Holden, so thank you, take care.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Chris. I'm  
18 going to miss you too.

19 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: All right. Same  
20 to you, bro, appreciate it.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much.  
22 Thank you. Be careful out there.

23 We have two people that have registered,  
24 but we don't see them on Zoom, David Stifler

2 (phonetic) and Alex Stein. Are they on remote, last  
3 call?

4 Okay. I'm sorry, but we don't see you on  
5 Zoom, so if there's anyone else present in the room  
6 who has not had an opportunity to testify, but wishes  
7 to do so, please raise your hand.

8 Okay. Seeing none, this hearing is  
9 adjourned. [GAVEL]

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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 April 28, 2025