

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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January 22, 2025

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HELD AT: 250 BROADWAY - COMMITTEE ROOM, 14TH
FLOOR

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola
Kristy Marmorato
Vickie Paladino

A P P E A R A N C E S

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

Jason Loughran, Senior Advisor for
Intergovernmental Affairs for the New York City
Department of Veteran Services

Mercedes Elias, U.S. Marine Corps veteran and
Chair of the New York City Veterans Advisory
Board

Ryan Graham, U.S. Air Force veteran and Vice
Chair of the New York City Veterans Advisory
Board

Joshua Sooklal, staff member for Hope for the
Warriors

Ashton Stewart, member on New York City Veterans
Advisory Board

Joe Bello

Timothy Pena, Veterans Justice Project

Dorothy Farley, Vice President of Behavioral
Health and Social Services for the Community
Healthcare Network

Claire Barker, Intake Advocate at Veterans
Advocacy Project

SEARGENT-AT-ARMS: This is a microphone check for the Committee on Veterans. Today's date is January 22, 2025, located in the 14th Floor Committee Room. Recording is by Rocco Mesiti.

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

At this time, we ask that you silence all electronic devices, and at no time is anyone to approach the dais.

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

Chair Holden, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you, Sergeant. [GAVEL] Good afternoon. I'm Council Member Robert Holden, Chair of the Committee on Veterans. Welcome to our oversight hearing on the New York City Veterans Advisory Board.

In 2015, the New York City Council passed Local Law 113, which required the creation of the Veterans Advisory Board, or VAB. The VAB was established pursuant to Chapter 75, Section 3103 of the City Charter. The VAB's role is to advise the

Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans Services on issues concerning veterans as well as active duty, reserve, and guard service members in New York City, and to connect the Mayor's Administration, DVS, New York City Council, and the veterans' community. Veterans have served with dedication and distinction and possess invaluable perspectives on civic life. Their voices should be heard not only on national matters, but also on local and state issues that impact their lives and their families. Members of the VAB are appointed to three-year terms, either by the Mayor or the City Council Speaker.

Annually, five public sessions, one in each borough, are required to be held in order to collect public input on issues of importance and/or concerns to the veteran community. In its annual report, the VAB recounts its activities for the past year and plans for the coming year, reports on progress of its prior recommendations, including updates on proposed legislation, and offers new recommendations to the Mayor and the City Council as well as to DVS on policy program and legislation.

Today, we'll be looking at the VAB's most recent recommendations and hearing from both DVS and the VAB on how each sees the work and effectiveness of the VAB. It is important to note that our Committee has been asked to hold this hearing about the VAB by interested public stakeholders, and today we are doing just that. So, how can the City Council better support the VAB in its mission, and what improvements can be made to ensure that veterans' voices are amplified and acted upon? That is the focus of today's hearing.

So, at this time, I'd like to acknowledge my Colleagues on the Committee. We have Vickie Paladino from Queens and Joann Ariola from Queens. Anybody else?

Also, I'd like to also thank the Committee Staff who worked to prepare for this hearing. John LaRosa, our Legislative Counsel to my right; Regina Paul out in the audience, or she's in another room, Policy Analyst, we saw her though, yes; Ross Goldstein, our Financial Analyst; and also finally, thanks to Daniel Kurzyna, my Chief-of-Staff, who's hiding in the side there somewhere.

I'd like to turn it over to our
Legislative Counsel to administer the oath to our
witnesses of the Administration. Thank you.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL LAROSA: Okay, please
raise your right hand.

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

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

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

COMMISSIONER HENDON: My name is James
Hendon. I serve as Commissioner for the New York City
Department of Veterans Services, and good afternoon
Chair Holden, Committee Members, and advocates. Thank
you for inviting us to participate in today's hearing
about New York City's Veterans Advisory Board, also
known as the VAB. I'm joined today by Jason Loughran,
our agency's Senior Advisor for Intergovernmental
Affairs.

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

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2 City Veterans Advisory Board consists of 13 members,
3 seven of whom are appointed by the Mayor, six by the
4 City Council Speaker. Two of those 13 members are to
5 be immediate family members, survivors, or caregivers
6 of a veteran. The remaining 11 members are to be
7 veterans. The VAB has five duties. They are, one,
8 advise the DVS Commission, two, hold at least one
9 public meeting in each borough each year, three, keep
10 a record of its deliberations, four, determine its
11 own rules and procedure, and five, submit an annual
12 report of its activities to the Mayor and City
13 Council. The report should include policy and
14 legislative recommendations for DVS and the Council.

15 For decades, the Veterans Advisory Board
16 has listened to the needs of New York City's veteran
17 and military affiliated community. The VAB has
18 translated those needs into sound advice on matters
19 including, but not limited to, the identification of
20 a veteran liaison in each agency, the expansion of
21 the Veterans Advisory Board to include veteran family
22 members and caregivers, DVS' provision of contracting
23 support to veteran non-profits that do business with
24 the City of New York, and the creation of DVS.

25

That being said, the VAB's work, all of our work, is nested within broader challenges that must be tackled if we are to make sure that New York City's veteran community continues to thrive. Chief among those needs is the need for self-identification among veterans. According to the VA's FY23 Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures Report, the veteran self-identification rate nationwide is 34.3 percent. That proportion dips to 29.8 percent in New York State, then to 24.1 percent in New York City. This compounds with another issue. The federal government does not aggressively market VA services. Case in point, the VA has a 369.3-billion-dollar FY25 budget. The VA's budget is the largest in the federal government, second only to the budget for the Department of Defense. However, many families are not aware of all offerings that are available to them. That, and there is no dedicated line for marketing and advertising in the VA's publicly available budget documents.

Add to that, America has a declining veteran population overall. Older draft era veterans are passing away. Our military was significantly larger during the conscript era, which ended in 1973,

compared to the all-volunteer era that we operate in today. The annual rate of veteran population decline is 1.82 percent nationally, 3.19 percent in New York State, and 4.83 percent in New York City, based on VA and census data. Compound the lack of self-identification, limited marketing, and population decline issues, and you have a group of extremely complex, interwoven problems.

The solution is to roll up our sleeves as a community, unite, and do the hard work needed to triage what is in front of us. For one thing, there must be a robust, whole-of-government approach towards identifying and serving U.S. military service members, past and present, and their loved ones. Secondly, there must exist strong public-private partnerships throughout the innovation ecosystem so that all stakeholders can join in this struggle. I'm speaking of government, finance, academia, industry, the entrepreneurial sector, and the non-profit space. Thirdly, and most importantly, undergirding this all must be a strong, influential veteran community. This includes individuals, families, networks, and organizations, you name it.

The tip of the sphere for New York City's influential veteran community is its Veterans Advisory Board. To that point, the VAB has played a critical role in providing the situational awareness that DVS and our leaders in government, elected and appointed officials, need when working to solve challenging community problems. By providing thoughtful, community-driven recommendations in its annual report, the Veterans Advisory Board establishes an enduring line of communication between New York City's veterans and their local government.

The VAB's public meetings serve as a forum for stakeholders to promote activities and opportunities to veterans and their loved ones. VAB meetings are also a place where, in real time, DVS accepts feedback and input from the public, listening to our community's advice. We course-correct on the spot when necessary.

Highlights of DVS actions that were directly influenced by the Veterans Advisory Board are the Veteran Business Leadership Association, VBLA. DVS launched this effort to empower veteran entrepreneurs by providing one-on-one assistance with city and state certifications, contracting

opportunities, and networking. This program exemplifies how enhanced contracting capabilities can directly benefit New York City veterans. We've partnered with organizations such as the NYC Department of Small Business Services, the LaGuardia Community College Apex Accelerator, Bunker Labs, and JPMorgan Chase. These organizations offer a variety of services geared towards veteran and veteran spouse business owners that facilitate starting, operating, and growing a veteran-owned business within New York City. Links and further information on all VBLA programs can be found at nyc.gov/vetbusiness.

Housing and Support Services. Since the establishment of our Housing and Support Services team in 2015, DVS has successfully housed 1,417 homeless veterans. This demonstrates our commitment to addressing critical housing issues identified by the VAB. More information can be found online at nyc.gov/vethousing.

Mission Vet Check. This outreach program, which was inspired by the VAB, connects veterans to essential services. Mission Vet Check addresses gaps in communication and support for our most vulnerable veteran populations. The program is effectively us,

volunteers, and our partners at New York Cares ensuring that someone calls each veteran in New York City and conveys to them at some point that we see you, we appreciate you, and we love you, is there anything that you need? In the most recent holiday session for Mission Vet Check, held on December 23, 2024, the program yielded in one day 1,563 check-in calls, proving to be the most successful single Mission Vet Check session held since the pandemic. Details can be found online at nyc.gov/vetcheck.

Supporting Veteran Vendors. New York City has a tradition of supporting veterans interested in operating as street vendors. The City and State's support dates back to laws established to benefit 19th century veterans hungry for entrepreneurial opportunities in the wake of the Civil War. Veterans Committee Chairman Robert Holden introduced Intro. 686 of 2024. Intro. 686 looks to amend the membership of the Street Vendor Advisory Board to include the Commissioner of DVS or their designee, to increase the number of speaker-appointed members to the Street Vendor Advisory Board to seven, so as to include a veteran community member. It would also require the Department of Veterans Services to post on its

website information related to resources and support for veteran vendors. Currently, information that we place online for veteran street vendors can be found at nyc.gov/vetvendors. This bill has been continually suggested and advocated for by the Veterans Advisory Board. Along with them, we thank the Chair, the Veterans Committee, and the entirety of the City Council for their support with this pending matter.

The partnership between DVS and the Veterans Advisory Board is rooted in a shared mission to enhance the quality of life for New York City's veterans and their families. Over the years, this collaboration has yielded tangible results, ensuring that the voices of our veteran community are heard and that their needs are addressed through innovative programs and policies. To name some of these achievements, one is the contracting power for small dollar contracts. One of the pivotal recommendations from the VAB has been to enhance DVS's contracting capacity, particularly concerning small dollar discretionary awards. In February of 2023, DVS was granted the authority to approve discretionary contracts of up to 20,000 dollars for initiatives benefiting veterans. This milestone has enabled DVS

to support veteran businesses through direct partnerships, facilitate funding for grassroots veteran service organizations that provide essential community-based programs, and streamline the procurement process in order to quickly address pressing needs within the veteran community. This enhanced contracting power aligns with our objective to foster economic empowerment among veterans. It underscores New York City's commitment to its veteran population.

Aligning the VAB with New York City's Community Veterans Engagement Board, the VAB has emphasized the importance of strengthening its ties with federal programs in order to increase transparency and optimize effectiveness. In response, DVS facilitated the VAB's introduction to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Community Veterans Engagement Board program. In 2025, the VAB will double as a Community Veterans Engagement Board, or CVEB, for New York City. The Veterans Advisory Board doubling as the CVEB means that future VAB meetings will be attended by VA leaders, in addition to representatives from the Department of Veterans Services. Attendance at VAB meetings will spike

relative to prior history because the meetings will be held on VA sites. We will have more lead time to promote VAB meetings than ever before. This is because working with the VA, the VAB will identify meeting locations well in advance. And as we reflect on that progress that's been made, it is clear that the partnership between DVS and the VAB is stronger than ever. Moving forward, we remain committed to expanding our contracting authority to maximize support for veteran-focused initiatives, strengthening the connection between the VAB and CVEB in order to ensure comprehensive community engagement and service delivery, and continuously evaluating and improving programs to meet the evolving needs of our veteran population.

In light of this, we would like to voice some recommendations that we believe would increase the effectiveness of the VAB further. Right now, members of the VAB serve three-year terms. Start and end dates for the members have no rhyme and reason. They are not uniformly staggered. In a perfect world, each year, one-third of the VAB's members would transition on and off the board while one-third transitioned off. So one-third transitioned off, one-

third transitioned on, or at the discretion of the Mayor and City Council Speaker, existing members would be reappointed. Given 13 members, this equates to four members rolling on and off during year one, four members rolling on and off during year two, and five members rolling on and off during year three. The start and end dates for members would match with the start and end dates for the fiscal year. New York City's Fiscal Year begins on July 1st. Streamlining this process would ease the administrative burden and further increase the efficacy of the VAB.

Another problem that the VAB faces is a lack of timely appointments to vacant seats and a lack of timely appointments when needed for members retained in current seats. In my time as DVS Commissioner and my time as a member of the Veterans Advisory Board for two years before that, dating back to 2018, I've never seen the board current on all of its appointments. I've also never seen all the seats on the board actively filled. Even today, as of this testimony, the family member/caregiver seat appointed by the Council Speaker has not yet been filled. It's been vacant for years. Consistently filling vacant

seats would allow the VAB to maximize the diversity of its viewpoints, leadership, and opinions.

Finally, we support current efforts that would have the New York City Veterans Advisory Board double as the VA's New York City Community Veterans Engagement Board. This takes the synergy and effectiveness of the VAB and puts it on steroids. Another reason why a VAB-CVEB merger is important, it is highly likely that in the spring of 2026, the next iteration of the VA's Asset Infrastructure Review Commission, the AIR Commission, will recommend to the U.S. Senate that the VA hospitals located in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and a major VA clinic in Staten Island be closed. This would echo recommendations made by the AIR Commission in its 2022 report. Those recommendations were ignored due to the political composition of the U.S. Senate at the time. The Senate Majority Leader was a New Yorker. That's no longer the case. If and when the next AIR Commission report says these VA medical facilities need to be shut down because not enough veterans are using them, then we need an active CVEB to help counter that narrative and to advocate internally in our community's defense. The potential hospital closure

fight brings things full circle when I began by saying that the number one problem our community faces is that we collectively do not self-identify, the number two problem is the VA does not market its services, and the number three problem is that the veteran population is declining. Even given future projections of New York's veteran community, assuming no increase in the military size and no wars, there will be more than enough veterans in 2045 to fill our VA clinics and hospitals almost two times over. The challenge is taking steps to inspire our brothers and sisters to self-identify. Along with DVS and elected leaders such as yourselves, the CVEB will be near the center of gravity for this fight.

In conclusion, I'd like to express my gratitude to the New York City Council, the Veterans Advisory Board, and the entire New York City veteran community for their unwavering support. Together we've made significant progress. However, our work is far from complete. By continuing to collaborate and innovate, we can ensure that New York City remains a national leader in veteran services. We are happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.

Information on the topics spoken about today and all

things involving the Department of Veteran Services can be found at nyc.gov/vets. In addition to the website, nyc.gov/vets, our agency can be reached via telephone at 212-416-5250, email at connect@veterans.nyc.gov, and social media using the hashtag @nycveterans. Details about the Veterans Advisory Board can be found at nyc.gov/vetboard. Separately, all veterans serving non-profits that are interested in applying for City Council discretionary funding are encouraged to visit nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding. The deadline to apply for City Council discretionary funding is Wednesday, February 19th. Veterans interested in applying to join their local community board are encouraged to visit nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard. For all boroughs except for Richmond County, applications to join one's local community board are due from mid-February through early March. The application to apply to join one's community board in Staten Island is rolling. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Commissioner. We've been joined by Council Member Kristy Marmorato, a Committee Member.

Commissioner, again, I thank you for your very thorough testimony. Just some housekeeping, because we looked at the website and the bylaws of the Veterans Advisory Board state that there should be 11 members. Yet, your website claims there are 13, but it only lists 11, one of whom has already resigned. So, just in the general, as we check the website, it's not updated. There's no minutes from 2024, any of the meetings of the Veterans Advisory Board. Why is that? Who's in charge of updating the website, first of all?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to start with the bylaws issue. The bylaws, that's an internal function of the VAB as far as it goes back to, one thing I mentioned in the testimony as far as determine its own rules and procedures so that's not something that we, DVS, have a handle on. That's the VAB. Also, when we look at things that involve the board, we look at law. We look at Chapter 75 of the New York City Charter, which states the composition of the board. That states as 13 as far as the law. And we look at, say, the Administrative Code, you know, Section 3105, which talks about, you know, how these meetings are being presented as far as our role

here so, for us, we are constantly leaning on what is in law and not what these bylaws are, and I can speak on that a little further, but a lot of this goes back to the autonomy of the board. We want to be as mindful as we can of the autonomy. Also, we want to recognize what we are to do and not do in law, and that's a perfect example where it's 13 members, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So it's 13 members. But again, my question is, who's in charge of doing the website, updating it? Is it DVS or is it VAB?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We're in charge of doing the website, and so that's, it's on us. For us, it's about, you know, having the updated information to make those updates.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So did you get the minutes from VAB for 2024, because not one meeting, the minutes are on there so if I wanted to go and check what happened, I can't find it.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Yeah, Chair, thank you for that question. One thing that we did last year at the end of the year was we collaborated with the VAB to provide a Zoom account for the VAB meetings from now on, because it was more streamlined

for us to be able to download the actual meeting minutes from what occurred, and so because it was a relatively new partnership we just did by issuing the Zoom account, 2025 will be updated more frequently and in a more streamlined way.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It was updated just, I think, today, right? There were some things that were added because we were checking on this. We wanted, we kept getting different answers on things and some contradictions, but you said that the bylaws need to be, I think that's where, you know, we'll question VAB, that the bylaws are internal to VAB so that needs to be, like, we need to codify certain things and make sure that it's very clear, there's no contradictions because the structure is very important. If there's no structure to it, then people start to drop by the wayside. Also, you know, we talked about, like, people not showing up. I mean, they're volunteers, and I understand it conflicts with schedules, but, and again, it's not up to, maybe up to your agency, and we'll question VAB, that attendance policies for the board members probably needs to be codified. I mean, that's what I'm looking at, like some kind of standard. Like, you know, they

do that for community board members, but it doesn't always trickle up to the borough president, let's say, to enforce it so we need some, the agency, probably your agency, to enforce the attendance policies. And, you know, we've heard things about also term limits for, which, you know, I personally feel term limits for volunteers should not be put on there. I mean, you know, so somebody's serving 20 years, if they're contributing and they want to do it and they're good, that they should stay on. So, we've heard a lot of criticism on how to change it, or how to make it more structured, but we need to tread lightly on that, at least to, again, the veterans that are volunteering should actually, we should work with them. So, and these, you have the option to do both. You can go physically to the location, and you could also work remotely at the hearing so that's a good, we didn't always have that, which is good. That's one thing that came out of the pandemic. Zoom came out, and we had, we were able to have more meetings that way.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, I want to just be clear, like, we'll come back to this issue of the board, and versus DVS, who has what, you know,

responsibilities. I got to acknowledge, we've got people who are doing this as volunteers, and we appreciate that, and so, you know, I don't want to in any way be seen as us throwing these folks under the bus who are doing excellent work. I want to say that as far as our board so there are pieces that we are doing...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But what we were saying is that if somebody hasn't shown up in three years, they've shown that they're not interested, but yet they still have the seat on the board, and that's what we need to codify, like, are there going to be standards rather than, and, you know, your comment on, you know, in your testimony about the vacancies not being filled is another problem, and that, that comes from the Council so that's up to, it's my job to make sure that we see, you know, we fill every seat, because they are volunteers, and you really need, you know, with 13 members, you really need most people there to actually contribute because they do have a lot to offer so I just don't want somebody taking up, you know, space on the board for three years and just not showing up so I guess the board will make that decision, right? I mean.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, I think it's really about folks serving at the pleasure of the Speaker...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Of the Mayor and the, yeah.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Serving at the pleasure of the Speaker so it's them as appointees, and then that could be something else that deals with the internal board of governments as far as the process.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So to make a, yeah, the appointments from the Mayor are seven, and then there's six from the Speaker, and of the six from the Speaker, only five have been filled, right? We have a vacancy.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How long has the vacancy been?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's never been filled. This is when the board was expanded. I believe it took effect in 2022, help me out, when they did the expansion, from 11 to 13 members to have those caregiver seats, and that caregiver seat has

not yet been filled on the Speaker side. That's the one seat that's currently vacant.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And where do the recommendations for board members come from? Does it come from your office, your agency, or does it come from?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good question. It's, you know, for the Speaker's side, they do what they do. We don't know what goes on that side..

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, no, but your, on the Mayor's side.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: For us, it's the Mayor's Office of Appointments. They will often work in coordination with us on these things, so yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, I'm going to get down to a series of questions that, you know, some of it you covered in your testimony, but just for the record, I wanted to ask, we talked about, you know, codifying roles and responsibilities. So, in its 2023 annual report, the VAB recommended codifying the responsibilities of DVS and VAB, which I just talked about, or some of it, to ensure both parties, you know, really are aligned on the expectations going forward so how does DVS plan to formalize or codify

its relationship with the VAB so that there is greater clarity on roles, responsibilities, and expectations? You covered a little bit of that.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to go deeper on this one because it's very important with the... we have a very good relationship with VAB right now as far as, you know, the current Commissioner, current Chair. I worry about the... I love the idea of the board having its autonomy. I say this as someone who was on the board before coming into the seat. What if you have a period where there's tension between the Veterans Advisory Board, which reflects the community, and us as government? If you codify things, if you get to a point where there's dependency between us, if there's tension, that can kneecap any autonomy that board has. You can go back in time to 2014, the beginning of the last Mayor's time, when there was a lot of advocacy around establishing DVS, as opposed to it being the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs. It's a lot of friction where the board was on one side of this and the administration was on another, and so when I look at this right now, we're in good times, but you've got to think a worst case scenario of how do we do this

in a way where we can still be thoughtful and try our best to make sure they have what they need logistically, but not get caught up where we've got, you know, deals or, you know, things signed between people who come and go between board members and commissioners that could in different circumstances be used to go against that committee as far as against the board so that's my big worry about codifying, and that's why I say I'm fine with doing it if we do it in law so it's something where no matter what...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, that's a broad stroke though. There are certain things that need to be codified so we have some standards. We don't want to make it very strict, but we want to make it where there has to be some rules, you know, you have bylaws.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: This strikes at the heart of it, Mr. Chair. We are guests who are invited to speak at these meetings that the Veterans Advisory Board holds, and so I just worry about when we talk about codifying things when we are another, just like, you know, you've had representatives from your team and you've come and spoken, so I just want to be

careful about how ingrained we are in the form and execution.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but I think we can go back and forth on this, but you do need some standards for attendance. I mean, this is my opinion, and we'll hear from the Committee Members and also we'll hear from your office, but there has to be some standards that we have to create, whether it's the Mayor... the Mayor's going to appoint seven individuals to VAB. I want to make sure they're showing up. Same thing with the Speaker's office. The fact that we left, our side left a vacancy is disgraceful. And we will make sure, but again, just getting that information is difficult because of where do you find this stuff, and then when you do look on the website, it's not accurate so that's why I think we need, and I can't even tell you, and we'll hear from VAB, but I can't tell you who's not showing up. You know, if we're going to appoint somebody, at least the Speaker's side, the City Council side, going to appoint somebody, we'll make sure they're showing up. So that I think needs, even though they're volunteers, they still are signing on to be on the board.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And I don't disagree with that, Mr. Chair. I just think that if that's to occur, if that's a remedy we'll have for the attendance issue you pointed out, that that should be done through law. That's just what I'm saying. I feel as though it's, you know, it's not, I don't want to get in the realm of being, of us managing or having control over this independent board. I just want to be mindful of that, and so I have no issue with what you're saying. I just think that if we do something...

(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, they're independent, but not totally, right? Because they have nothing to say about, or at least we'll hear from the VAB, but they have nothing to say about appointments. I mean, we do and you do. The City Council does and the Mayor's Office. So that's not, you know, you're actually, you know, they're not separate and apart. They do have... we have to provide, you know, I mean, we provide certainly, we're looking at the VAB, we're doing a hearing on the VAB now, and so we have to provide oversight. Your office should provide oversight also. In your role, I mean, we already saw that the website hasn't been updated. So

that's something that we found out, we looked at it and we said, why not, and then, well, you know, that's not doing the board any service by having it lag behind for a year and a half or two years and the information not accurate so anything we could do, I mean, I'd like to make sure that the website, and that could be done, you know, within one day. So I think, and the fact that on our side, that we don't, we have a vacant seat for years now, like I said, is a disgrace, and I'll make sure that we address that. Whereas, you know, we'll come up with recommendations for replacements or at least appointments, you know, and it could be a collaborative effort from your part, you know, yours and the VAB. But I'm not going to say we're going to just, you know, turn everything over and not provide oversight. We will.

Supporting veterans' engagement. Let's go into political process. In 2023 annual report, the VAB called for investing in resources to encourage and support veteran engagement in the political process, including placing veterans on community boards, which is near and dear to me. I've mentioned this. I have legislation also to create a veterans committee on each community board. But how can DVS

collaborate with other City agencies or offices, you know, the borough president, for instance, to promote greater veteran representation and civic participation on, you know, on community boards in particular, or just other boards, but create a, especially the borough presidents could make sure that we get veterans on each community board and then hopefully a veterans committee on each community board.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think what we can do is work to get our assets in front of more of the elected officials, more of the borough presidents on these things, as far as we routinely and organically promote community boards as an opportunity. We tell folks go to nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard. We mentioned it here at our hearings. We mentioned it at VAB meetings. We mentioned it in public. We also promote it on the website and social media and our newsletter. But I know that we can work to try to get our assets on this in front of more of our elected officials to amplify it. Another thing, too, a caveat to that recommendation from the VAB, we are mindful of our people not being, we cannot involve ourselves in politics, so when it talks about it in a way of

getting veterans to engage in the political process, the line for us is promoting getting in touch with your community board and joining that board, not doing other things to get involved politically so that's something that we're very, very mindful of. And then another piece of this, which is something I mentioned before, is let's not forget only one out of four veterans in this city self-identifies. And so for us, we're working to get as much data as we can about our veterans in the hands of our elected officials to help amplify those efforts to have these touches, and so this goes back to agreement that we've signed with the Council Speaker, what we've signed with... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: My question is really talking about partnership. We're not talking about political when we talk about community boards. It's volunteer position. And we talked about, can you help us in getting the borough presidents to include a veterans' box on the application for community boards?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Absolutely. We can reach out to... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Which I couldn't, by the way, I tried to find an application many times if it's not in the zone of the application process. I mean, I think Manhattan has it where you can get an application 12 months a year, but not every borough has that. Every borough president's office, you can't find the application. So, I think that should be something, whether we have to do it with legislation, but it should be on like where you could download an application and there should be a box for veterans. Will you help us do that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We will (INAUDIBLE) I have no issues with that. I'm with you, Mr. Chair. Right now, so on our website at nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard, we're waiting to get the latest and greatest updated information from the various boroughs so we can have it updated right now because right now we've still got 2024 information so that's something we're working to update, and so we'll let you know how that goes, but also do what we can to tie in with the various borough presidents so we can lock into their comms operations on this.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And again, I'm referring to all these 2023 annual reports because

those are the latest we have. I think the '24 is coming out. It should be out sometime in the next few months. But in its 2023 annual report, the VAB's report recommended providing personnel support for the VAB, including through legislation to ensure continuity of staffing and technology management. So, this is something where we can, both offices can help, so can DVS describe any steps it has taken or plans to take to provide dedicated staff or technology support to assist VAB with scheduling, meeting, logistics, record keeping, things like that and other operational needs?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, we've had an open offer to the VAB to help get a work study for them. This goes back to 2021. And so we just stand by with that as far as getting that job description so we can put it out. Right now, we post our VA work study opportunities on our website. We post it in the initiatives tab where VA work study. So at nyc.gov/vets initiatives tab, VA work study, and so we also include it in our newsletter. And so for us, once we have a job description, we're happy to get the word out and hope that we can get someone. If the VA work study program, that's someone who's currently

using the, if they're currently using their VA benefits, be it for vocational rehab or post 9/11 GI bill, etc., they are able to work for up to 25 hours per week as a work study where they're paid, you know, tax free to provide that assistance so we're hoping that could be a way to do this. Another thing, what's tough about this one from a broader angle, Mr. Chair, there are more than 200 boards and commissions in New York City as far as New York City boards and commissions, 17 of which are advisory boards of some sort, and none of those advisory boards have dedicated staff so we're trying to do this in a way where within what we can touch, we can try to get some support to these folks. Because I feel that when we talk about having the dedicated staff, that it escalates beyond just being about us, but about these other 17 advisory boards, and I feel like that's a discussion that's beyond my pay grade so now it's really trying to help with the VA work studies. And there's another program called DOD Skill Bridge that's available as far as providing folks who are transitioning out of military who can work full-time supporting the board.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, on the subject of, you know, working to actually spread the word about our Committee's hearings on veterans. We want to, you know, increase communication about our hearings on this Committee. So, in its 2023 annual report, the VAB recommended that DVS uses existing communication platforms to inform veterans and their families about Committee on Veteran hearings. I know you do that verbally, but is that on your website? Do you post our Veterans Committee hearings on your website?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We've started posting them on that website. For us, the biggest piece has been doing it through social media, Mr. Chair, through Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter. And we most often, you know, than not put it in the newsletter. That was something that came from the board. We saw an immediate spike in attendance once we started posting a newsletter last year, and we thank the board for that, and so for us, it's the newsletter, it's the website, which is, this is our first time really putting it on our hero. When you go to [nyc.gov.vets](https://nyc.gov/vets), you can see on the front, the tab

for the hearing, and then social media between Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and X.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Let's talk about addressing potential areas of disagreement. Because, you know, anytime you have a number of people in the room, they're going to disagree, and it's not, you know, it's certainly, we've heard some disagreements from, you know, and criticism of this Committee, of me, of you, Commissioner, we hear criticisms, and it comes with the territory. But let me just tell you, stakeholders have raised questions about whether there are areas of disagreement between DVS and VAB, and is it being discussed? And could you speak to any points of contention of how they're being addressed? Obviously, we've heard criticisms about the lack of appointments or the makeup of the VAB that people have been on a long time, that there should be term limits, that we should, you know, limit them to six years or whatever terms. Again, speaking personally, I think if you're a volunteer, you're doing it out of the goodness of your heart, and we should not discourage, as long as you're showing up, and that's why I said codifying it, though. But can you address some of the things that

you've heard about the criticism of your role along with the VAB role?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think that I want to start by saying, I feel like that it's been a very collegial relationship when I think about the VAB. I don't think of it as being something where it's been, you know, a lot of tension and whatnot. It's just, there's certain structural issues that come up, and I'll speak to those but, at the end of the day, I feel like, you know, it's, you know, 90, 95 percent of things we have overlap, and maybe 5 percent where it's not, but it's not about that. It's really the structural components than it is other things. And one other thing I'll say before I get into some of these issues, we're all on the same team. Everyone doing this work, between you on the Council side, between us at DVS, between our friends at the VAB and veteran stakeholders. We're all doing what we can to be right by veteran and military families. And so just a couple of things that I'd flag. You know, one is, it's the logistical aspects of it as far as just things like, you know, okay, let's identify the location for this meeting, let's make sure we've got a Zoom account, etc., lined up, and we tried to

resolve that by having the VAB aligned with the VA now, with the Community Veterans Engagement Board, where now you've got these meetings occurring this year at a VA facility, in a place where you know they'll be ample attendance, and we know that the location is secured. We can promote well in advance. So that's one logistical piece... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, but do you help set up the meetings for them at that location? Do you help them? I mean, let's say reach out to the location and try to help them in scheduling it and gaining the hall?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: If the VAB reaches out and says, hey, we need help, find the location, then reach out. It's an ask. So that's right. Currently, that's how it is. Another piece of it was what J.L. referred to, the Zoom account, as far as just having a Zoom account that's available for VAB, recognizing the group has no resources. People have no, there's no personnel, no non-personnel funding towards it so getting that account for them, which also redounds to help us now have the easy access to recording... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So the VAB doesn't have a budget?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Nothing?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Correct. Yep, that's right. This goes back to what I'm saying, where it's bigger than us in that what we're describing, this is what the advisory boards look like in the city as far as being in this situation so it's a bigger conversation on resourcing this. And so logistical pieces are things that we've worked to triage. First off, these meetings being at VA facilities this year, tying in with VA. Also the Zoom account being already set up where it's accessible such that they have control of that account. We can still access the recordings. We can post things more swiftly. Other issues, it would be, I think managing expectations is tough and that there are recommendations VAB will come to us with, and it just takes time for us as government to get these things done. We work and we hear them, but it's complicated simply because of this being longer for us going through bureaucracy. A couple of examples, one of the recommendations was about allowing for veteran-owned businesses to have

contracting opportunities with the City. The contracting rules for the City are adjudicated by New York State. That's a New York State legislative issue, and so that's not us, yet we hear these things. We try to voice them as best we can. And so that's one example. Another one is we know about the fight to have co-ops added to the home loan program. Same thing, it's a federal issue. It deals with our federal elected officials. It's not us. We work to try to push it. There's another very important that we're proud of, but it's taking time. It's transitioning our VetConnect platform, our online services platform to a new vendor, and that transition process, it's looking to be in effect no later than May of this year, but it's just taking time. And so this is things where it's beyond our control when we look at what's around us working in government. Another one is our Dwyer program, how long it took for us to get that off the ground to be able to make that available for our veteran non-profits to compete for that funding that we got from the State. Same thing. So a lot of the recommendations that VAB gives where we unfortunately just, if I could snap my finger, I'd love to, but we

can't, and so I think that's a point of friction at times.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So let me ask you something. I'll put you on the spot here. What recommendations would you make to the Mayor about VAB?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think that to VAB specifically, let me think, because I would say the same thing I mentioned as far as appointments, that hits both the Speaker and the Mayor... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I got one for you. I got one. How about a budget, Mr. Mayor, for VAB?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And this is the same thing too, where we got to be clear when we talk budget for one, we're talking budget for all, and so not against it, I'm just making it clear.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't get that. Wait a minute. Budget for one. We're talking about VAB.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: In other words, it's the precedent. It's very similar to the community board suggestion too, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: They can have a budget.

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2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Say it again.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Community boards have
4 budgets.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, no. I'm talking
6 about telling each of the 59 community boards, you
7 must have a committee for a subcommittee on veterans.
8 You see what I mean? It's the precedent piece of it
9 where I agree with the spirit of it. I just want to
10 call out this other dynamic.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No. We're trying to
12 do legislation where the City Council could mandate
13 that each community board have a veterans committee,
14 which is not like... if we're going to try to get
15 veterans to self-identify, it's a good way, it's a
16 good start. And if we want more veterans on community
17 boards, if they certainly can help and they bring a
18 sense of stability to the community boards, that I
19 think that should be legislation. The borough
20 president should do it. They should do it on their
21 own. They shouldn't need legislation.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I agree with you...

23 (CROSS-TALK)

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But I would ask you...

25 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It could be seen as...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But I think the recommendation, my question is, what would you bring back to the Mayor? I would like you to bring back to the Mayor, because I did, that the Mayor should fund your agency, quadruple it, and, you know what his answer was when I asked him a question on his... he had a Zoom meeting with the Council and I said, your agency is essentially a 5-million-dollar budget, the smallest in the City of New York, and I said we should increase that budget because you can't even communicate with veterans to do a mailing, to do something, to actually reach out, and we are lagging, like you said, in many hearings, you say at every hearing, that New York City veterans are lagging behind the national average on so many issues, so many programs within the VA so if we're not... our veterans are lagging behind the national average, then we need to increase the budget, and you know what the Mayor said to me? And he kind of said that we shouldn't have to do the work of the VA in New York City, which was, I thought, appalling, and I criticized him on that. I said, that's ridiculous. We're talking about our veterans and our residents of New York City and have served our country and, if we

can give so much to people that didn't serve our country, that weren't even in our country up 'til a few weeks ago, and we're giving them, we're giving migrants money, a lot of money from the City Council and from the Mayor's Office, that we should be able to increase your budget, so I'm going to challenge you, Commissioner, to get to the Mayor and say, let's at least fund VAB, and it's not talking about... we're not talking about millions, we're talking about thousands of dollars that they could have a budget and we can make their lives easier so I would ask you to do that.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I feel like this is, I'm thinking this is deja vu, because it's the similar question last hearing, and I think as I'm taking it in, my response would be this, as far as, you know, asks for the Mayor. It's same ask as far as for the Council to fund the organizations. In other words, I'm not just thinking about it in terms of fund the VAB. I'm with you on that. It's fund, like, we've got some very good veteran organizations doing good work out here, and what can we do to reward that as it continues? In other words, I always say, if it's a dollar on the table, it's between me and one

2 of our people who are doing things out in the street,
3 give it to our people. We need it, but they need it
4 too. I mean, at the end of the day, 6.4 million,
5 which is the entire budget, that's, I know that's
6 small compared to 112 billion, but you've got veteran
7 non-profits out here living hand-to-mouth right now,
8 for whom, you know, I just want to, so if you ask me,
9 like, if I... (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We're not talking
11 about a large...

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I just want to say,
13 like, that's my, my ask would be put the money on the
14 table, but it doesn't have to go to DVS. Put it to
15 the community. I just want to say that.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I just need everyone
17 on the same page. If we're serving veterans and
18 you've dedicated your life actually, because I see
19 what you do. You're amazing. You're all over the
20 globe actually, and you're always on the road
21 somewhere trying to help veterans and, you know, your
22 resume is amazing so I would just ask you to commit
23 to, let's get VAB funded. I'm going to make it an
24 issue on my budget requests, but I'm going to, you
25 know, and I know you may have a problem with it, but

I would bring up your own agency that you can't do what you, you know, you can't reach your potential by not having enough resources, and you don't, you know, that you've admitted that, you know, that you can't do outreach, you know, and which we're trying to scrounge money. We're talking, but we're not talking, we're talking thousands, we're not talking millions so I think let's both commit to asking the Mayor and I'll ask him, you have more to lose than I do in asking and demanding, but I think it's got to get to that point. If we're going to make VAB viable, make their lives a little easier, give them a budget, give them where they could, you know, and you could administer the budget if you want. I mean, if that's, if you think that's a requirement, then fine. But I think we need to step up, both of us.

How does the DVS measure the effectiveness of the VAB in advising the Commissioner on key issues affecting veterans and service members? So, you know, I know you said you didn't want to interfere and they're autonomous, you want to keep them separate, but there are things that you, you know, as the structure of it, how many people are attending? Are you aware of attendance at all at

these? I know you're on the hearings or at least the VAB meetings, but are you aware how many people are participating? I mean, how many veterans are on the call who are not board members? What's the attendance? Has it been dropping off? Are you gauging any of this? Do you see the effect? And I'll ask VAB this, but are you seeing a drop off, you know, and what can we do to improve that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think that it's been a steady number of attendees. If you exclude Veterans Advisory Board members, you're talking about less than 20 or so who are attending regularly. There was a spike when we had the 2022 situation where there was the threat to close the hospitals as far as the VA hospitals in Brooklyn and Manhattan and the Staten Island. That's when we saw, you know, the numbers surge. But, typically, it's roughly, when you exclude VAB members, I would say just me eyeballing as an attendee, I'd say you'd have no more than 20 who are coming from the community.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: And, Chair, just a comment on this topic. I think that where you and other Council Members could be really helpful in us is obviously those folks that attend are civically

engaged. These are some of the most impressive veterans in New York City who are attending these meetings and they have fantastic ideas to have legitimate concerns, and, you know, to your point I'm sure that there are other civically engaged people in other districts that if we got this information out via their City Council office, I think we hope that we could recruit more of these civically engaged people who maybe are not identifying right now as veterans, but are pushing their advocacy in some other district that we don't know about so we would like to work with City Council in a greater way to actually advertise the community board meetings throughout every City Council District, not just the wonderful Committee that we have in City Council.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But, but just, but you're aware, like my question though, you're aware of the attendance, that people are not showing up so what do you do about that? Do you question the board? Do you say, well, you know, this person hasn't showed up. Maybe we should make a recommendation to the Mayor that his appointment or the City Council appointment is not showing up or they're not participating.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm sorry, I thought... are we talking attendance for the board members or talking about attendance for the general public?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: VAB, Yeah. The VAB meetings. Cause there's five a year, right? There's five, one in each borough. At least that's the idea.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: I know one thing that we have done, I mean, just recently when we had our last meeting at Barclays, we facilitated the meeting with the VAB and, you know, we put a lot of thought into a centralized location, a place that garnishes attention, and, you know, we really thought that by, I mean, Brooklyn Mets was very kind to provide beverages and a space for us. It was beautiful. And so, you know, thinking about how do we make, maybe, how do we transform a community meeting from, you know, your traditional a hall with some coffee in the back to, you know, Barclays Center and nice beverages. That really didn't draw it in. So we're definitely trying things. It's just a matter of, again, all the good points that you guys are bringing up in terms of how do we get in front of the people who are civic... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, yeah, but I'm glad that you're, I mean, that if you get someplace that's great, like Citi Field in Queens, if you got Citi Field and they're going to provide food and a nice atmosphere, that should be a draw, not only for the board members, which we want to include just veterans, the community, the public, the community to show up and, if we publicize that, I'm sure this will boost VAB.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think this aligns with VA, set it up where we'll be able to put the word out exactly where the meeting will be well in advance. I think that will directly input and impact attendance.

Okay. Council Member Vickie Paladino has a question.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: It's not so much a question as it is a statement. I've been serving on this Committee now for quite a while and we circle back to the same thing again and again and again. Five million dollars is not enough money, period. What do we get from the State? Not enough money, period. We want to know how do we reach our veterans? How do we reach our veterans on a 5-million-dollar

budget? We need a huge social media and media campaign. That costs money. We need to be able to inform our veterans that are not self-identifying in a very, very forward way. Hosting Barclays is great, but how do they know what's going on at Barclays? This is absolutely ridiculous. We need social media to reach our vets. It's as simple as that. It's an ad campaign, guys. What's the mystery here? What is the mystery? We need to get to them. The best way to get to them is an ad campaign. You get people to change from drinking Coke to Diet Coke. I mean, we can get our veterans to self-identify if they know what they get at the end of the rainbow. There's a bunch of stuff that's waiting for them that's not there because they're not there so let's call it what it is. More money and let's get serious about doing an ad campaign to get these guys and girls out there to make them aware of what's available. You could fire a shot into the forest. Who's going to hear it? If a tree falls, who hears the tree fall? So it's the same thing. It's ridiculous. Get real with it and get serious with it or this is a waste of time. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So there's no question?

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: No, (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Council Member Marmorato.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you, Chair. So, I just wanted to know, (cough) excuse me, for your VAB, how many individuals are from each borough? Do you have like an idea or a count if every borough is represented?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We can get it from the... it's in the VAB report as far as saying which borough has which person. Every borough is represented, but I can get that. It's in the report. I don't have it on me right now.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: That's okay. I'm interested to see, you know, where the numbers are coming from. And so we do have the veterans.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Jason's is going to look it up. He'll look it up (INAUDIBLE) Okay, we're getting it. Thanks, Ash.

Sorry. I'm sorry. Yeah. He'll look that up. Yeah. He'll look that up.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: So, we do host the Veterans' agency at my office. We don't have a good turnout. How do we get people to, like, how do you suggest for me as a Councilwoman, when we do have these services come to the office, how do you suggest that we get the outreach because I don't want to waste your time and resources. I mean, it's great if it only, if we do outreach to one person that does come in to at least get some kind of help. But, like, how do you suggest that we advertise for this or, like, connect with my community?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's all the traditional advertising, but it's the things that your comms team already knows. For us, what we're looking to do is by April, no later than April, have divided up our veteran content info so that every Council Member has that information. And so that's also tied into what's going on as far as this, the new organization that has our VetConnect contract, it's combined arms. One of the other things it'll be able to do is take all of our information and disaggregate it so we're able to say, here are all the veterans in your District so it can help you be able to better touch that group, those folks. Right

now, we have at least 140,000 veterans' contact info and, you know, that doesn't include data from State agreements that we recently signed, and so I'm hoping that when it's all said and done, we'll have close to 200,000 veterans' info broken up into, you know, 51 different buckets as far as being able to export it and get it out. Our goal is to get it to you in April, especially as you've got to lead up to Fleet Week, to Memorial Day, so my hope is that you've at least got a pool to say, okay, I know who 90 to 95 percent of my veterans are out in Thrive, like within my region.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: So it would be like email addresses and stuff like that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: It'll be email, it'll be cell phone, it'll be physical address. We want to get you the best info that we can get you on this, Madam Councilwoman, so I'm hoping that can help because you already know all the other things. We're talking about a group that is not identified.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Right.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And so we want to get this information to you all sooner than later so as soon as we're able, we want to start pushing it

out so that that can amplify your ability to do outreach.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Well, thank you.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: And on that note, you know, you guys have heard us. One of our top legislative priorities at every level is data sharing agreements. Data sharing agreements go such a far way for us, especially with the limited budget that we may have on marketing and outreach and things, and so you'd be surprised, or not surprised at all given your experiences sitting up there, that, you know, government doesn't always share their information with one another from the federal and state level, and we've been trying to support legislation that would make that more seamless and support our agency and able to collect this information and this idea of no wrong door approach to government so, if they go into any office that we or the State Department of Veteran Services are going to be aware of it so that we can help our Council Districts and our State Assembly Districts and State Senate Districts engage with veterans and educate them about all the things that we're talking about

here today so it is really important to us when it comes to outreach and engagement, but it comes down to the data and the marketing budget, as Vicki had pointed out, Councilwoman.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: I'm good. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Just an outreach for the veteran resource person coming to your office. You talk about once a month. I would work with the local posts in your District and notify the commanders and just say, you know, we have this service. It's, you know, right over here. And it's, you know, the day of the month that you're, you have that person. Just put that out as a regular. And it's always the same day of the...

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Not really.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's not really, okay. Well, it just started so what I would do is just try to reach out to the post commanders, and that seems to work because then they're in touch with their members and you start getting more people coming in so, once it gets a foothold, you'll have a line actually so that'll work.

Also, but you said, Commissioner, that you do email for the veteran resource person coming into the Council offices. Do you send out?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, just most recently. I mean... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You sent out 51...

COMMISSIONER HENDON: (INAUDIBLE) when we have someone so you can speak to Council Member Zhuang with that. Yeah.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Well, I'll speak on two examples. One that was highly effective and one that is a work in progress. So as the Commissioner said, these data sharing agreements are critical for us to get what information we know to the Council Members who are partnering with us for veteran resource centers. One of this, the example of this going really well was the Borough President Donovan Richards' office. We were able to conduct that data sharing agreement and you may have noticed, but veterans like myself received direct mail campaigns directly from the Borough President's office about veteran specific events so I personally saw a difference in just engagement from the BP's office. Councilwoman Zhuang and our partnership with

her, when it came to her District, we had a significantly lower number of veterans data, right, smaller geographical area, and so we were able to submit a data transfer to their office where we provided them all of the veterans that we knew about that were in the District and we gave them about two or three weeks or more to engage with them, to prepare them for our staff to come on a specific day. You know, it wasn't as effective as we hoped, but we are talking about a very small cohort of veterans in a very specific District. But over time, we believe that this is going to be a great asset to City Council Members and our partnership with those veteran resource centers, and we do intend to conduct the same data sharing agreements with all of you and the rest of City Council as we receive more of the data so it's something that in 2025, it's a top priority of ours to be able to give this information to you and all the City Council Members.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And how many veterans... do you have... I mean, off the top of your head, how many veterans do you have their email addresses and it's working? Do you know that you communicate with them? Do you have any idea?

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2 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: For everyone,
3 our entire...

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The whole city.

5 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: The whole city.
6 So Commissioner... (CROSS-TALK)

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: (INAUDIBLE) 140,000
8 is the count.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: As far as what
11 we're...

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You have emails for
13 140,000 veterans?

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, it's 140,000.
15 We're working to get that number up. We estimate
16 there to be north of 200,000 veterans in the city. My
17 personal estimate is somewhere between 230,000 to
18 250,000. It's so many because a lot of the guardsmen
19 and reservists who never served on active duty are
20 not counted by the feds. So like the census would say
21 135,000, Census says, yeah, we have 140,000 in
22 reality right now so the numbers are higher than what
23 the feds say they are.

24 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Yeah, and Chair,
25 when Commissioner Hendon took the position of

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2 Commissioner, that number that we had touches on for
3 contact information, I think it was around 3,000 at
4 the time.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, somewhere
6 around 3,000. So we've been working to...

7 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: This is what
8 we've been doing since...

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you went from
10 3,000 to 140,000?

11 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Yes.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And we're trying to
13 get... It's a lot of things we're doing to get... (CROSS-
14 TALK)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's great. That's
16 an accomplishment. But if we could do... do you have
17 the budget to do emails to 140,000?

18 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: We could always
19 do more with more.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And it's not just
21 about the emails.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, I'm asking... this
23 is a very specific question. Do you have the budget
24 to email 51... Let's say about these 51 veteran
25 resource sessions in each Council Member's office?

Can you help? Because that goes a long way. We can have somebody sitting there, a veteran resource person from DVS sit there the whole day, and if nobody's showing up, it's a waste of our resources so to publicize that to the 140,000, we would get a lot of veterans. It stands to reason. But do you have the budget for that?

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Before...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes or no? Yes or no?

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Well, I wanted to talk about something else.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, no, no.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We don't have the budget to touch these people... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, that's all I wanted.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: But I just think it's beyond email. It's really about... and mind you, you've got some folks, three out of four, who did not self-identify so you're reaching out to many people who now... who have been in the shadows by design so it's about luring them out, and so it's a complicated thing. We don't have the money to really establish a

relationship like that with as many people as possible.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's really sad that we can't even... let's forget about the US mail. We can't even mail notices, but we can't even email.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, it's not about the email though, Mr. Chair. It's about whatever will be most effective for that particular veteran.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, email works. It's established. It's for decades. We've had it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: What I'm saying is not everyone... it's almost like...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, I know, but 140,000, let's say half of them are working, or they check their email, that goes a long way into reaching out, not only to self-identify, but what's available to each veteran that down the block, they live down the block from a Council office, that they can go and get some answers and get some programs and communicate with the VA, help them maneuver, so we're talking about a few hundred dollars it would cost you to do that.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So we have MailChimp. It's a question of how do you do something

when someone opts into receiving that email so we're not in a position where it goes directly to junk or spam so that's why it's bigger than email. To me, it's a deeper point... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, but my question is how many have you verified that they're willing, they opted in for email from your office, let's say? Do you have a number on that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'll just speak to the... not everyone opts in to receive our newsletter. For instance, we have roughly 10,000 newsletters... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, so even if it's 10,000, if you could..

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And only about 25 percent open that on a given week. It's just, what I'm saying is to get at what undergirds what you're saying, speaking deeper than email, it takes a large amount of resource to really establish that relationship, Mr. Chair.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Yeah, and Chair, if you'd like, we can always conduct a data sharing agreement with Council, and then if you guys could support us in any type of direct mail campaign, we

could provide the data to do so for what we... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but just if you can look up your database and see how many can you help to... and I'll certainly talk to the Mayor about increasing the budget for emailing, getting the resources in DVS, because we made a small step last year in last year's budget. We need to make a giant step this time, because this is a very important issue that our veterans are not being served in New York City to the fullest extent that they could be, and it's partially on both agencies. It's your agency and the City Council to fix it and, if we can't even communicate with our veterans, that's a big problem.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Well, Chair, if you're doing any print direct mail campaigns, we'd love to partner with the Council here to provide you guys with what information we have so that you can send those mailers out on our behalf.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Or just a reminder to the Council Members to put veterans' issues in their newsletters. I guess we get two a year, and you could even do more, but we also do blast emails so just piggyback. You know, again, it's sad that we have to

do this, but anything we could do to get the word out because New York City government is notorious. They have great programs. They just don't know how to sell it. They don't know how to advertise it. They don't know how to get it out to people. So, it becomes a waste then, that we put all this money into it, and very few people are taking advantage of it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think you'll see us doing that more. Like this past January 1st, I emailed personally all of our Council Members on New Year's Day, just to kind of touch base so you'll see us trying to communicate directly more with Council Members, and I think... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but you know
(INAUDIBLE)

COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's a great idea as far as the assets.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You gotta keep... you know, we get like 10,000 emails in the office, and sometimes when there are big issues, we get a lot of spam that goes through so it's actually, you have to be persistent. It has to keep coming. And gradually it'll catch on, but if every... I'd like to know a count at one point, maybe we'll do it, I'll ask you

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2 this at a future hearing. How many offices, and you
3 could ask your DVS resource people, are they busy in
4 each office, and which offices are not that busy, and
5 which... what can we do to increase the attendance at
6 that particular... let's say half the Council offices,
7 I know Vickie Paladino, Vickie, you've done the
8 veteran resources.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: (INAUDIBLE).

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Like twice a month
11 you used to have, and now we only get once a month
12 because...

13 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And that was a
14 huge disappointment to the people who come to my
15 office...

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Because they
18 really were counting on...

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Tanya twice a
21 month so it was... now that it's down to once a month,
22 I'm telling you, she stays sometimes until 6 o'clock.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, she's busy. I
24 have the same resource person in my office. Tanya's
25 great.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: She's amazing.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But we had... we were the only two Council Members that had it.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Right.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We had twice a month. And then when the Council funded it for all 51 offices, we lost a day, and that did hurt us, but we're willing, you know, we're willing to share. But it is a problem. But our office... both of our offices were very busy. Tanya was always working extra, actually. She wouldn't take a lunch sometimes because she couldn't. But that's why we need to focus on... if you could look at the 51 and do a survey with the Council offices, are they getting veterans coming in?

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: And Chair and Councilwoman, we want to just thank you guys for being the trendsetters here. That got us to where we are today.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But thank you for... it was your idea to have that person twice and that was a godsend, it really was.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: We will be reaching out to your offices for your guidance and support on how we best... how the VFW will best roll

out this Veteran Resource Center because to your astute point there, we certainly do not want to be using City Council funding to send somebody to an office that they're not going to see anyone for the day, and so whatever your experiences have been and how you've made a very successful Veteran Resource Center, we're going to have to mirror that same success and teach the other City Council Members how to do what you guys have done.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great.

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: So you'll be hearing from us and VFW over the next month or two.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Also, I have an answer to Council Member Marmorato's question as far as how this breaks out right now. So, 13 members total for the VAB, 12 seats filled currently. It's four seats are Queens, three seats are Manhattan, two seats are Brooklyn, two seats are Staten Island, one seat is Bronx. So, once again, four seats Queens, three seats Manhattan, two seats Brooklyn, two seats Staten Island, one seat Bronx.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Well, thank you, Commissioner, and thank you, Jason. Thanks so much...

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2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: For your testimony.

4 We're going to call on the Veterans Advisory Board
5 now. Thank you.

6 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Thank you,
7 Chair.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you, Council.
9 Thank you so much.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) Mercedes
11 Elias?

12 CHAIR ELIAS: Elias, yes.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Elias. Okay. You're
14 the Chair of the VAB.

15 CHAIR ELIAS: Yes.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And Ryan Graham is
17 the?

18 CHAIR ELIAS: Vice Chair.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Vice Chair. Okay. So
20 we thank you for... do you have something to read or?

21 CHAIR ELIAS: I do.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. First, all
23 right, so we'll start with that.

24 CHAIR ELIAS: Good afternoon. My name is
25 Mercedes Elias, and I'm a U.S. Marine Corps veteran,

currently serving as the Chair of the New York City Veterans Advisory Board. With me is Ryan Graham, U.S. Air Force veteran, who serves as the Vice Chair for the Board.

I've served as a member of the VAB since 2020, serving as Secretary of the Board for three years, prior to taking over as Chair last year. During this time, both the VAB and DVS have evolved significantly to address the needs of the veteran community throughout New York City. The members of the VAB are a true representation of diversity, having served in conflicts ranging from the Vietnam War to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We represent the five boroughs and work in a variety of industries, ranging from finance to non-profits, and include small business owners. While the Board is representative of the veteran community, there is work to be done to improve the efficiency and validity of the Board.

The Commissioner previously listed the issues with the appointments and selection of Board members, and I wanted to expand a bit upon this. Leadership within the VAB is not involved in any process for members being appointed to the VAB. We're

simply notified after the members have been appointed in order to include them on upcoming sessions. The Board's diversity in age, location, and industry, among so many other variables, is something which should be considered when appointing new members to the Board. It's logical that we should have input regarding potential candidates to sit on the Board to ensure we maintain an accurate representation of the community that we serve.

In addition, there have been members of the Board who have been inactive in their involvement, and there is no course of action possible to remove and replace these Board members. There are several constituents who are interested and willing to sit on the Board, who I am certain would participate, engage, and advocate for the veteran community. Term limits would hinder some of the institutional and historical knowledge of our older members, two specifically come to mind who are present at every single meeting, unlike some of our newer members who have not attended meetings in years.

The goal of our public sessions is to hear from the community on pressing issues impacting

veterans within New York City. Engagement varies across each meeting, and we've worked over the years to streamline the focus of our public sessions to cover the charter areas of DVS. This ensures brevity and clear communication to our constituents regarding the responsibilities of DBS and helps to ensure we can follow up on specific action items discussed during these sessions. During my tenure on the VAB, a significant issue was the proposed closing of VA facilities during the last Asset and Infrastructure Review Board. As the Commissioner mentioned, we will be working as a CVEB at the federal level. In doing so, we're helping to be more proactive in our approach to the data collection and utilization of local VA facilities so that we're prepared for the next AIRS report, which significantly impacts the veterans within our communities. Working with the VA directly in these sessions will help to secure funding at the federal level for initiatives we want to address going forward.

I believe that consistency in both communication on subjects covered and the location of future public sessions will help to increase engagement, which has continued to improve

participation during my time at the VAB. At the same time, we need active participation from our elected officials, and constituents need to see action taken on items discussed during these public sessions. A frequent issue we've worked with DVS over the past few years is the need for data and accountability when it comes to assessing issues raised from veterans within the community. This helps the Department showcase their efficacy while at the same time helps the VAB to validate issues raised during the public sessions. While there's been significant progress made toward tracking data on veterans seeking assistance through DVS, we believe there's insufficient tracking tools to monitor if issues or cases have been officially resolved. Currently, there is tracking for referrals to other agencies, but there is not a feedback loop on resolution for these issues. DVS is currently addressing this by identifying a new vendor to help via their VetConnect system. This is something that we will continue to monitor over the next year as new implementations take effect.

I wanted to address some of the issues presented here today. The first being the update of

the information for the VAB on the website. This has been a continuous issue over the past few years, and we frequently mentioned the need for a liaison to be codified to the VAB to reduce the amount of administrative errors for something as easy as updating the website.

Second, I have served on the board where there was a contentious relationship with DVS and the current relationship where we work much more harmoniously together. The codification of responsibilities is not for anything significant regarding legislation or significant actions taken by the VAB. In our previous reports, this was for simple items such as location of public sessions, who is managing the recording of meetings, etc. I do not believe that this would create a conflict of interest regarding the independent nature of the VAB. This also references our previous recommendations to assign personnel to help with administrative items. Work studies will not help to appropriately address this since work studies are temporary, and the goal is for continuity of information throughout various terms on the VAB.

These are but a few of the continuing issues we're addressing as we work with DVS to create a city where veterans want to return after their time in military service. We believe there's been significant growth and traction that DVS has been able to achieve over the past few years. However, we do believe there is still significant work to be done. We look forward to continuing to work together with both our elected officials and the team at DVS.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Chair. Ryan, do you have something, testimony to read? Okay. We're going to ask you some questions, though.

So, when you select a location to have the meeting, it's five a year.

CHAIR ELIAS: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You get no budget for refreshments, even bottles of water?

CHAIR ELIAS: Nothing. So most of the time, if we host it at the legions, the legions will pay out of pocket. If we work with local universities, the universities will use their budgets to pay for it. So, we don't have any sort of budget allocated to us.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, for five meetings a year, and I assume you don't get charged or DVS doesn't get charged for the hall, the meeting place?

CHAIR ELIAS: No, normally it is our members that are participating members of the legion or DFWs, and they get it gratis through the VSO.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, what would you say if you had a budget, would it make life easier for the Board?

CHAIR ELIAS: It would make life easier. The issue that DVS referred to about the Zoom was when we had the AIRS, the meeting with the AIRS report with the two people that represented the VA, both the Bronx facility and Manhattan facility, there were over 100 members present on that call, which Zoom you have to pay for. My company hosted the previous Zoom account, which was a paid for account. I left the company. So that was why there was an issue with needing to host Zooms that are over 100 people in attendance. So, something as simple as a Zoom account, that's what we need money for.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: If you get a Zoom professional, it costs...

CHAIR ELIAS: Correct.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't know how
3 much, it costs a few hundred.

4 CHAIR ELIAS: Not even, it's like 50
5 dollars.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We're not talking
7 about a lot of money though.

8 CHAIR ELIAS: Something, something.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but you don't
10 have that right now?

11 CHAIR ELIAS: Nothing, no. So that's why
12 we had to work with DVS to get them to pay for it.
13 Because previously, when they used to run the WebEx,
14 nobody on the DVS staff was monitoring the actual
15 hearing. People were coming off mute. Nobody was kind
16 of silencing and letting the speaker talk. So then
17 that's why we said, okay, we're going to take care of
18 it since nobody is really monitoring the sessions.
19 Then when we took over and we started having a
20 significant amount of attendees, that's when we
21 needed to pay for the separate Zoom account.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So who actually
23 monitors? I think it's Zoom, not WebEx anymore. It's
24 Zoom?

25 CHAIR ELIAS: Zoom.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, who monitors the
3 Zoom? Like who's the person that does that?

4 CHAIR ELIAS: I do.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You do it?

6 CHAIR ELIAS: I do.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So there's not even
8 somebody that you could have just monitor it so you
9 can take the...

10 CHAIR ELIAS: Because you need to monitor
11 the chat, especially when people submit in questions.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but that's
13 difficult.

14 CHAIR ELIAS: Correct... (CROSS-TALK)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE)

16 CHAIR ELIAS: You're paying attention and
17 making sure people don't come off mute. There was one
18 instance where we had a previous VA secretary come,
19 somebody hacked into the meeting and took control
20 over it, so you'd have to kick them out. Things like
21 that. So cybersecurity, monitoring the chat,
22 submitting questions. Yes, somebody needs to be there
23 facilitating the meeting.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it's really sad
25 that you have to scrounge like this and not get

support, basic support. We're not talking, folks, we're not talking like 100,000 dollars. We're talking about a few hundred. So, this is the lack of commitment that we're seeing from the City that they could.. the City could make it easier. The Council could make it easier and the Mayor's Office could make it easier for you guys to run these, giving, let's say a stipend for refreshments.

What percentage of your members, I mean, I remember the meetings I was on, there was like a few in the room, but then most people were on Zoom. Has it changed at all?

CHAIR ELIAS: For the VAB members or the actual public?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The VAB members.

CHAIR ELIAS: The VAB attendees, it's normally, I would say a third to if half at best per meeting, public sessions.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So a third, you said a third are on remote.

CHAIR ELIAS: Oh, in-person, combination in-person and remote.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: A combination, all right. But how many attendees is the average for the VAB?

CHAIR ELIAS: In-person, it does depend by borough because if let's say one of our members in Staten Island is very active with his legion so his whole legion will attend. Whereas if we do it somewhere like Queens or the Bronx, perhaps not, but 20, roughly 20.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Now in your 2023 annual report, you recommended increasing interagency cooperation regarding vendors' preferences for veterans. Could you elaborate on what specific actions you envision the City taking to ensure veteran street vendors' concerns are heard and addressed?

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: I'm sorry, can you repeat that question once more?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and you want me to go from the, in the 2023 annual report, you guys recommended, VAB recommended increasing interagency cooperation regarding vendors' preferences for veterans. So, you know, what specific actions do you envision the City taking to ensure veteran street

vendors, their concerns are heard and addressed because we've heard this over and over again. The vendors are not respected. The police are issuing them tickets unfairly. They don't even understand the law. I'm talking about the police. So, they're being treated, they're supposed to have different locations and corners that they could operate on. It doesn't seem it trickles down to the police or, you know, or even our City agencies, so your recommendations are, you wanted some preferences, you know, some of these laws upheld, and the veteran vendors being treated with respect. Has there been any movement on that, and because this is from 2023 we're talking about. Do you see anything changing?

CHAIR ELIAS: So, I think the introduction of having the veterans on the actual board and being represented is a significant movement because right now a lot of what has been passed has been through the Vendor Advocacy Project, which is non-profit and does not include veterans, so we need to get veterans included in the actual legislation. Separately, what Ryan wanted to refer to was the designation as an SDVOB at the City level. Because currently you can... you want to expand on that?

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Sorry, I'm having an issue. Oh, here I go. Yeah, one of the biggest issues is obviously M/WBE, they get preference for different things, including procurement opportunities, but SDVOBs, Service-Disabled Veteran Owned Businesses, it's non-existent here in the city, but yet up in Albany statewide, there is that designation. And I mean, outside of my role on the VAB, obviously some of you already know what I do on the policy front. I've constantly put it in, it's on the VFW's agenda to put it in there, but I'll tell you outright we don't get that much support off of the City Council side, minus all of you, you're very...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, the fact that we didn't even appoint, we have a vacancy for years now, that kind of speaks volumes at this point of the City Council, of which I'm a Member, that the vacancy hasn't been filled. I would even... I think this Committee should have some input and we do have some input on appointments, at least we could recommend to the Speaker, but ultimately it's the Speaker, but I think that you guys should... you mentioned this, Chair, in your testimony that you should have something to say, you should have recommendations

that are honored, not just, oh, this, we need to, you know, we should have, you know, this person would be good for the board and then nothing happens. Have you done this by the way? It's a good question. Have you recommended someone and it just fell on deaf ears?

CHAIR ELIAS: No, we haven't. We know there have been issues when it comes to the investigation part of the appointment and we've talked to constituents that had been recommended and then I don't know what happened politically or through the investigation where they didn't end up getting it.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'll make a commitment. If you give me some names and not just one, if some people aren't showing up, then we need to replace them both on the Mayor's side and the Council side. But if you feel that we have a vacancy now in the City Council side, that you have, if you give me a few names, I'll put it forth to the Speaker and follow up that we'll try to get an immediate appointment because, actually, you know, if we're having less members, that's counterproductive. It's hard enough getting everybody together on a specific

date and not to fill the entire board, that's unacceptable.

So, you know, I'm going to the '23 report. Are you working... you guys are working on the '24 report?

CHAIR ELIAS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You'll have that when? When do you think that'll...

CHAIR ELIAS: First draft should be out next week.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Oh, okay. And then you have the board vote on it and then...

CHAIR ELIAS: They come back. Everybody comes back with their edits, iterations, additional information. There are a number of items that will be new that weren't addressed previously that have been brought up numerous times during the year.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, I'm going to go through a few questions here. In your '23 annual report, you also call for providing funding and resources for student veterans and for DVS to work with student veteran representatives to attract and recruit veterans to New York City colleges. You know,

has there any movement on that or any practical steps?

CHAIR ELIAS: There has been at the CUNY level. What we've seen is strong presence of student veterans at the private universities, such as Fordham, Columbia, NYU. We think there's a lot more focused effort in those military veteran departments and CUNY, just the structure of how it's set up in each of the veteran offices, and one of the board members here can expand upon it. Did he walk out? Oh, Josh. One of our board members can expand upon it because we did discuss this earlier. If you want to talk about the way that the CUNY veterans offices are set up separately to the private universities.

JOSHUA SOOKLAL: Hi, Chair. Joshua Sooklal, current student, CUNY, John Jay, staff member for Hope for the Warriors. I'd like to say this. Throughout my endeavor in the CUNY realm, I've seen a lot of uncertainty, mainly on the main office of the CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs. I have no idea what they do, but I'll tell you one thing. The constituents at BMCC, John Jay, Kingsborough, Queens College, those military directors, they work and they work very well. I can honestly say the school system

and the school-going veteran is probably, it's probably the worst thing you want to do after you get out of the service and go to school and try to make it, but these military directors specifically, those ones I mentioned, they advocate, they help, they support. They do more than I can do in a day, and I try to work with every single one of them.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But are there colleges in CUNY that are not stepping up, that they're not, their offices are non-existent?

JOSHUA SOOKLAL: Non-existent, you can say.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What I would like to, if you can communicate with my office, which unit, because I'm from CUNY. I taught for over 40 years in CUNY at New York City College of Technology. I'd like to know what they're doing and then whether some of the other units, based on your experience, what schools, what campuses are doing their job and what colleges are not doing anything or very little for veterans.

JOSHUA SOOKLAL: I can definitely get you that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So that's... if you could... we'll talk after the hearing, but that's important to me and certainly important to the endeavor here, but we need something, like your recommendations, and this is going back to '23. This is not last year. So, if we're not getting answers from '23, then what do you guys, what do we hope to accomplish here? So, we need some of these addressed. And CUNY is one of them. CUNY is one of them that I could actually talk to the chancellor about and try to get some answers for you.

CHAIR ELIAS: And I think, just to add on that, one of the significant barriers to student veterans coming specifically to CUNY schools is that CUNY does not have housing at a reduced amount similar to the private universities. Private universities do offer that reduced rent for students. The CUNY schools do not so it's very difficult for them to afford being able to live here, going to school full time on just the GI Bill when their rents take over half of the GI Bill cost so that is something significant that we would need to work with different departments to help try to address, but

that is a significant barrier to student veterans coming to New York City.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Also, I don't know why the clock was on. We don't need the clock. In your 2023 annual report, you recommended that the Mayor's Administration and the City Council provide DVS with funding to assess, evaluate, and document the impact of DVS programs because you're an independent body. I'd like that information. That helps us. That helps this Committee. So, from your perspective, what key performance indicators or data points should be, you know, should be actually prioritized?

CHAIR ELIAS: Going back to my statement, the biggest issue that's come up repeatedly in the public sessions is the actual follow-through of the complaints or any of the inquiries filed because there's tracking of what kind of inquiry, where it comes from, what the subject is, and if it was referred, but then that's where the cases for the veterans falls off and there's no followup. There's no feedback loop back to the veteran saying, this is what we took care of, did your issue get resolved? There always seems to be excuses like, oh, well,

there's HIPAA. We can't find out about it, oh, that's out of our purview. You don't need to get into the specifics. If a condition was treated appropriately, did it get treated? Yes or no. There doesn't need to be any specifics. Was the case closed out? And that is the biggest gap in information right now.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Welcome to government.

CHAIR ELIAS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Let's talk about City employment. So again, referring to the annual report from 2023, you suggested creating a citywide veteran employment program, great idea, and making veterans a protected class for hiring preferences, which is, that's something we could do in legislation, I think, so, and we have some, we have some that this committee will hear, some bills, but how do you see VAB working with DVS and the City Council to advance these goals, like from your '23 report, what are the biggest... I mean, I know what the biggest barriers are. It's always about follow-through, bureaucracy in government, getting these programs through. But like, I would ask you, what can we do to work together with VAB, with DVS, and certainly the City Council to

actually get some employment programs and get priorities for veterans. Like what areas of employment do you see us being the most effective?

CHAIR ELIAS: Well, I think for the City Council, that first barrier to just getting them as a protected class, I think directly the DVS and VAB can work together because we are aware of those organizations that are working to get veterans into skilled labor jobs, into computer IT jobs. There are a lot of organizations that between both of our collective energies, we can get connected to the City agencies. We just need them to get that preference to know that they're going to be able to be employed by the City and then what... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, getting them preference but... and again, to be specific, like that would be nice if we can get a preference, and I'm not sure we're going to get every employment, every job description on the priority list, but let's say, where do we start? Like what... veterans coming out of the service, what are they most good at? What are they, you know, they're better at certain skills.

CHAIR ELIAS: It's really... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are they better in leadership?

CHAIR ELIAS: Here's the thing. It goes across industry, across skillsets, across all sorts of jobs, because just because somebody did a job in the military doesn't even mean that they want to do that job in the civilian sector. What we're saying is that there are organizations that have Helmets To Hardhats, you know, Helmets to Education. The City needs to get connected to those agencies because right now, New York City is not known as a place where veterans can transition, get gainful employment and also afford to live so just making sure that those City agencies are aware, but the City agencies have to be on board with actively wanting to recruit veterans, and that's where we need advocacy to tell...

(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, we talked about with some of the unions because in Long Island City there's a lot of unions that have workshops and they have apprenticeship programs so I would think that's a good start. That's what I would recommend that we start with apprenticeship programs and give our priority to veterans where they can get the training,

and, you know, when I visited some of the union shops, they did have a preference. They said, well, we'd love to have veterans come in because many are already skilled at certain aspects of just life rather than young people coming out of high school where these veterans are actually... they have a discipline already, they have training, they have a work ethic so that would be a plus, and that's how we could sell it to employers, but certainly to unions too so I think that's where we could start.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Yeah, I just have to throw in there. Mercedes mentioned Helmets to Hardhats. It's a perfect example. Local 3, they have a veterans club out of the Belarus VFW and those guys are really big. They run in numbers. So, what I've noticed, it really comes down to the grassroots level. VSOs especially. But yeah, and not only that, say in the, if you're going into that sector, say you might go into finance, Mercedes might know more about this. I believe there's what, Veterans on Wall Street. And there's another one, I can't remember what it is, Corporate Partners.

CHAIR ELIAS: American Corporate Partners.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: American Corporate Partners. So there's the resources out there. It's just getting the communication.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but we should, again, if we reach out to the private sector, and say would they consider a program to give preferences to veterans in hiring? I mean, that should be, I think most companies would agree to that. We just have to facilitate it so I think that was one of your recommendations, which now we need to act on it.

ACTING COMMISSIONER LOJAN: We just need help on the City side. We just need help with the government agencies on the City side to be a little bit more open.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. So which agencies are doing this, by the way? Do you know off the top of your head?

CHAIR ELIAS: Which ones are?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Preferences for hiring veterans.

CHAIR ELIAS: MTA has a preference for hiring. I think also the Bridge and Tunnel. MTA? Those are the ones that we know about, just off the top of our head.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, we'll try to, again, that should be a point of a hearing from this Committee, and we can get some companies to come in and maybe get them to commit. I'm sure, again, if a company can hire, you know, again, there's a lot of jobs that are, you know, they're unfilled at this point. Many companies need skilled workers or at least competent workers and they can't fill the positions, but there's others that, you know, they're very competitive, but I think a preference to veterans should, I think most companies would agree to this so it's up to us.

Again, I'm going to go your annual report from '23 on veteran treatment courts, because that during the pandemic was a casualty. The veteran treatment courts, many of them didn't function. Well, most of the courts didn't function during the pandemic. But in your '23 report, you recommended extending veteran treatment court services to veterans regardless of discharge status, which I would agree with. I think most people would agree with because there's reason maybe they didn't get an honorable discharge. It could be service related.

CHAIR ELIAS: So, I actually did legal work in the Marine Corps, and I can tell you that there's an actual whole page where you talk about what benefits you have a right to based on the characterization of service when you separate. Now, if you look even now and one of our members can talk about even when you were homosexual in the military, you would have gotten received a dishonorable discharge. Now, a lot of those are being overturned so we don't think that the characterization of service should be a barrier to getting assistance through the veteran treatment courts, just because sometimes it is subjective that a service member was separated. It could have been through drug use. It could have been through false allegations. There's a number of things. So, we don't feel just specifically with the veteran treatment courts that your characterization of service should prohibit you from being able to adjudicate the case at that level.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. So, like I think some of this requires legislative action so I'd like some recommendations from the Board as to what areas specifically we can improve and what legislation might we draft to make this a reality

because I think it's a very important point that they did serve their country and they ran into some issues, whatever it is, and they actually, they're probably the first ones that need the veteran treatment court, but what we found is that a lot of it wasn't trickling down to NYPD. Like I'm in constant contact with the Queens DA because that's my borough, and Melinda Katz has been outspoken on this and actually makes this a point, but some of the other boroughs weren't doing even the veteran treatment courts for a few years during the pandemic, and we had a hearing on this and we found out that some of the boroughs weren't doing it, but I think they're all caught up now. But we do need... that should be a very important piece of legislation if we can get that through, whether it needs to be a state or city, we'll work on that.

You mentioned, let's talk about the board appointments because we touched upon this and you mentioned this, but the VAB, you have 13 members. We talked about the concerns in delay of appointments. Could you describe your understanding of how the appointment process works? Like you mentioned, you should have something to say, I agree. And if you

could talk about a process that you discussed, like maybe for each, like for the City Council side, you can send either a letter or an email, whatever it is, of certain people that you feel are qualified and it could be from various boroughs, and you do the same through DVS, possibly for the Mayor's side. We can actually advance it so let's come up with, like if you think of an ideal process, and I think you said there's, is there one vacancy now?

CHAIR ELIAS: There is one vacancy for... it's one of the new positions that opened up for caretaker.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And how's the attendance though? Are there board members don't show up at all?

CHAIR ELIAS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: There are?

CHAIR ELIAS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what do you do about it? Do you...

CHAIR ELIAS: There's no course of action.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's why I suggested to codify it. Like we need some... that should be in the bylaws.

CHAIR ELIAS: It makes a significant difference. Even this past year... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How about you go back because I don't want to interfere with your bylaws. I don't think the Commissioner does either. But how about you come up with suggestions to the bylaws? In your first meeting, let's say. I'm only suggesting. I'm not saying you have to do that. But let's try to fix some of this where we come up with a process. And it's one for appointments, the second one for people that are not really participating. And how do we, you know, I know the Mayor's Office could remove them, right, and so can the City Council, the Speaker can, but we need some actual language that maybe you can control some of that. Like if you feel that the person hasn't attended in two years, three years.

CHAIR ELIAS: Which we have that data. It's tracked in the minutes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

CHAIR ELIAS: So we can tell you who hasn't.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, so if you could say, just put a couple of, you know, categories in the bylaws on how do we correct some of this because

it's not helping anyone now. Have people just take up space. So that was my other question.

And let's say collaboration with DVS. I just want to touch upon this. How effectively do you feel that your Board, the VAB, and DVS are working together to address veterans' issues, and are there examples where a better coordination could have resulted in improved outcomes?

CHAIR ELIAS: I wouldn't say one specific example. I think... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Don't worry the Commissioner's sitting right there.

CHAIR ELIAS: No, I'm looking at Ryan... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Don't look at him. You don't have to look at him. I know he couldn't get any closer.

CHAIR ELIAS: No, listen, again, the relationship has evolved. Different members on the board have evolved. I talked to the Commissioner very freely about negative things, about positive things. So, I would say, again, I've been through a contentious relationship with the VAB and we work much better now. Is DVS going to do everything for

everybody and fix every answer? No, but you have to just continuously be working on it. And I think right now we do work together to say, okay, let's shift our focus, what's the priority? Make sure that we get resources. If we don't have an answer, how are we getting answers? We do try to follow up in our executive sessions to say these were the issues that were brought up the last meeting, where are we at with these issues now to make sure that they're addressed in the public session? So, I think right now we have a good path going forward. Is it something formalized in writing? No, but I think that there's no instance of us saying, hey, where are we at with each of these issues that something hasn't been addressed or looked into or we haven't been given an answer to. I think the only outstanding issue is the PFC Dwyer funds that have continued to been delayed, delayed, delayed, payments haven't been made. That's something that's beyond DVS's control, which we're saying, hey, can you work in our agency and talk to the Council to see can you bypass some of the process to get those funds to be allocated to DVS directly so then that way there's not this continuous

delay. That's the one issue that has really stood out over the past year.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that's citywide actually, the vendors not getting paid or programs. But what I would like from, and again, to help us with evaluation of programs, what programs you feel should be funded, increase the funding and what programs are not working, and if you've gotten a lot of complaints from your members so that's the feedback that actually is very, very important and probably that's where the Board can help us the most because we're going into budget season now so what programs should be enhanced? What programs should be double in size because they're really helping and there's a waiting list to get help for veterans. And what programs are not working that you feel your members are complaining about, that they're not getting the help? So we constantly hear when I go to the Borden Avenue Veterans Shelter, that they feel they're not getting good services or they're not getting the mental health. We hear a lot. We've heard that over and over again. It has improved though. We do hear some of it has improved, but not all of it.

But we need to know specifically what programs should be enhanced and vice versa.

So, is there anything else that the VAB believes that it should be doing that is not currently, we're not doing for veterans or how do we strengthen DVS' efforts? So anything, any recommendations that I'd like to hear and I'm sure the Commissioner would like to hear where you feel your members are all saying the same thing. If we're hearing it over and over again, then we need to address it.

CHAIR ELIAS: Well, you mentioned it earlier, Chair. One issue that came up frequently throughout the year was the amount of funding that's going to immigrants compared to veterans. That was a big piece for a lot of veterans that they advocated for continuously, and that is something that you can bring to the attention, especially during budgetary discussions. But otherwise, I think that a lot of this we can lay out in the 2024 report for you, especially the specific actions that the Board has asked for.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Do you have a question? Council Member Paladino.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Now that there's a change at the federal level and we have a new President, do you see any more money coming our way? I mean, do you see an uptick that this is going to be a very good thing now for veterans, and can we lean a little harder now on the federal government knowing that they will be more responsive?

CHAIR ELIAS: Well, that is our goal for participating as a CVEB. However, at the same time, they may do away with the CVEB altogether so it's a matter of how can we get in contact and get more communication at the federal level because, even if it changes now, more or less, we need to continue to stay in the front and center of the staff at the VA so then that way, even when the next president comes in or the next slew of politicians comes in, we continue to be at the forefront saying that we are the model for other large cities to say how you can support actively the veterans. You work a little bit more on the political side.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: He's the political guy?

CHAIR ELIAS: Yes. I just work in finance.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Well, policy. So technically wearing the other hat, it's not supposed to be politics.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But it is.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Yeah, well, ultimately, and I misspoke earlier, I think. Everything, it has to get down to the granular level community boards. I actually sat on CB10 with Joann, and I actually, you know what? All I knew was what was going on in the MilVet community, but when I joined the board, I learned a lot. Actually, Joann, I'm not, well, she's gone. I'm not blowing smoke her way, but between her and the chairwoman, Betty Bratton, they were fantastic. And I learned a lot about more of the community stuff, public safety, transportation.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Is there a veterans committee on Board 10?

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Well, I was done with the board in 2020, but I believe not. But Betty was very good. She always targeted me out. Out of the 50 members of the board, Brian, you got something to say, so I was like, no, not this time. But definitely having a committee on each board wouldn't be bad. And

like I said before, I sort of misspoke. I don't wanna say all City Council Members, but like, well, I know Vickie, I'm sorry, Council Member Paladino, Chairman, you guys are very good, but majority of the City Council, veterans were at the bottom of the totem pole. If you look at the overall City budget, we're just above community boards. Community boards are at the very bottom. They get like, each board gets around a million bucks a year to kind of fund their staff, their district, people that basically run the boards so it does say a lot. I look at the numbers and it does say a lot. Sometimes, you know, and I think getting veterans on the board, each board, it can work. Because what they'll do is they sort of start pressuring the Council Members to actually take action. I'm not gonna say which one, but where my specific VFW is located, I'm not even from that area. It's a very, it's not a great relationship. But you know what? I look at other alternatives, the private sector, the New York Mets, Steve Cohen, his team, they've been fantastic. Like I said, I could talk forever. But yeah, that ultimately, what I'll say is, I agree with quadrupling their budget. But Commissioner Hendon, he did make a point before when

he said, you know, kind of guiding that funding towards organizations, say like the VFW and service officers to kind of help out with claims, that's usually where stuff happens at the ground level. Veterans, they come out, usually the first six months to a year, they're in like no man's land so it's like...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But Ryan, now's the time to make noise and to be the squeaky wheel. We need every veteran to talk to their Council Member to make this a priority, because it's not, you know, we're gonna miss the opportunity. This is gonna be my last budget in the Council to try to get some more funding for veterans and DVS and more programs. But when we don't have a groundswell, and we really need to coordinate that, not only from the VAB, but also from just the DVS, from all members, all veterans around the city coming and testifying at the budget hearings to get a bigger piece of the budget for veterans, because it is lacking. And I brought up the migrant situation, how our veterans are sleeping on the street or in less-than-ideal conditions, while people who didn't serve our country, weren't even citizens, haven't been paying taxes because they just

got here, they're getting hotel rooms. That to me is, and that's what I used in some of the analogy last year, and it didn't work, fell on deaf ears. I hope that the Mayor, and again, I brought it up, and we had one hearing already on his budget, and I wasn't very hopeful that I got through, because I got an answer that was totally unacceptable from him so I'm going to keep bugging him, but I need everyone.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: You need support at the bigger level. I know we've had this conversation before, and I'll say it, the veterans' community as a whole in New York City is very fragmented. So I mean, if there's an issue, say veteran street vendors, or homeless vets, if we want to hold some sort of a press conference on the steps of City Hall, maybe you might be lucky to get like 20 to 30, but then when you have other bigger issues, say like the influx of migrants, or funding for, I don't know, whatever else, you're gonna see hundreds of people, but my opinion is we really need to get down to the grassroots level.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But the Commissioner mentioned this, and he mentions a lot at hearings. He mentions that our veterans are not self-identifying

like the national average. I think we're way below. For disability, we're lagging behind for disability applications, or at least to try to get a percentage of our veterans to qualify for disabled veterans. We're not getting that either. We're lagging behind in that so that's why the City, and I brought this up to the Mayor, and I think I brought it up to the Council a number of times, that we'll get that money back because if veterans get, if our veterans, New York City veterans, get more services from the government, they'll spend it in New York City so the economy will improve, and it'll be a marked difference... how many... 200,000 veterans in New York City, you'll see a marked difference if they start getting their fair share of funding so it's up to... a small investment, we're not talking about a lot, a small investment by New York City into veterans will pay dividends. I have no more questions. Does anybody?

Thank you. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can't...

CHAIR ELIAS: Yeah, Ashton is a member.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Then you can come up.

Oh, you can come up then.

ASHTON STEWART: I just have one thing..

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I just meant you
can't sit there and say something. You have to come
up.

ASHTON STEWART: Oh, that's fine. Thank
you so much, Chair. And you have done such a
tremendous job as the Chair of this Committee over
the years. All the legislation you've sponsored to
better the lives of veterans and their families is
not falling on deaf ears. It's something that's
resonating with the community... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, it's funny. I
don't feel I've made enough progress at all.

ASHTON STEWART: You are, you're getting
the conversation started. Even your attempt to talk
to the Mayor. And as far as the VA, this is their
role. The problem is that the veterans that we're
trying to get in touch with aren't going to the VA.
But if we can get them there, then suddenly a whole
new opportunity can open. They can find out about
eligibility. They can be empowered by learning about
benefits that they might be eligible for. And if that
happens, then suddenly you can take some of these
veterans off Medicaid and they start getting the

money from the federal government, which is a good thing for the City, and that's what we're missing here... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, that's a great argument, but it's a catch-22. If we can't communicate with them, if we don't have a budget that we can communicate.

ASHTON STEWART: But we can, we can. We can do it through communicating with other veteran advocates, with their families, with people who work for social workers across the city, with empowering programs like the Vet2Vet Cafes that we do just to get people together and talk. Talk about end-of-life benefits that a lot of veterans don't know about. And the VA did a huge campaign last September because only like 20 percent of veterans are even aware of these benefits. You can get buried for free in a national cemetery and have a full military burial. People don't know about these things. And that's a huge cost saving. And your spouse can be buried with you. It's such a wonderful, beautiful thing for those who are patriotic and want to go back to that time of their life when they served and end the same way.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Tell me, and again,
3 it could be Mercedes, you could mention, what does
4 the VA, how does a VA communicate with veterans? I
5 mean, you're both veterans so.

6 CHAIR ELIAS: Mail, snail mail... (CROSS-
7 TALK)

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you do get
9 mailings on programs like what he just mentioned?

10 CHAIR ELIAS: Programs, even if you have
11 an appointment, you're going to get three letters in
12 the mail, which just go to waste and trash, which for
13 younger generation, it's really bad to be that
14 wasteful. But even older veterans don't even use
15 technology and email so it's very difficult. So, in
16 my opinion, and Ryan, say if you feel any different,
17 the VA is just there and it's just like, just come to
18 me. There's no push of information.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, the VA doesn't do
20 your, let's say it doesn't send you a mailing to say,
21 fill out this so we can have your current address,
22 your email, you know, what...

23 CHAIR ELIAS: No. It's just when you get
24 benefits...

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How are you doing...

CHAIR ELIAS: You're assigned to a specific VA and they have to have your up-to-date information.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right.

CHAIR ELIAS: But other than that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you don't get that.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Yeah, actually, I get a ton of cards in the mail. One of them I had to over the past month, renew my card. I utilize the Brooklyn VA. I definitely utilize it. It's a great facility.

CHAIR ELIAS: I utilize it.

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: But I do have to point out one thing that I find interesting. I'm very inquisitive. I like to ask a lot of vets. So, I noticed a lot of the post 9/11 vets served in Iraq, Afghanistan, anywhere in GI. They tend to rely more on their private providers. One of the members of my post, he actually works for Northwell Health so why not utilize Northwell Health? But the VA is actually good. You don't have any co-pays, nothing. My wife, she's actually on Champ VA. We're about to get her set up through, I forget what it's called, Champ VA,

over on 23rd Street, so she can get care there just in case something happens.

CHAIR ELIAS: But it still takes a long time to get an appointment. I mean...

VICE CHAIR GRAHAM: Oh yeah.

CHAIR ELIAS: A month, if not multiple months at a time.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, thank you both. Thank you so much, and we're going to move on to the public now, public testimony.

I'm going to open the hearing for public testimony. I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

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

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms in the back and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have three minutes to speak on today's hearing topic, New York City Veterans Advisory Board. We will hear all in-person testimony first and then turn to testimony on remote Zoom.

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

I will now call on the first panel. Joe Bello, Mount Lacey...

UNIDENTIFIED: He left, sir.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, and Timothy Pena.

Joe, you could start.

JOE BELLO: Before I begin, I'd just like a point of information and around transparency. I've heard testimony today by the Commissioner and others about the VA's Community Veterans Engagement Board merging with the VAB. Lo and behold, I happen to be the Chair or was the Chair. All I can tell you is that in the prior administration, it was coming to an

end, I had a conversation with the Veterans Experience Office down in D.C., and they had let us know that everything was on hold because the administration might not be continuing the Veterans Experience Office. Now, if Commissioner Hendon was having conversations, I certainly would have appreciated a phone call from him to let me know what was going on, but I didn't get that. Part of the problem with that too is the CVEB is a federal entity. The VAB is a City-chartered board. So I'm trying to figure out how are we adding the members onto the CVEB, which is something different or are we saying we're going to rewrite the law and kind of merge federally or locally the CVEB into the VAB? So, I just wanted that point of information because that's very confusing.

So, with that, Chairman Holden, Members of the Veterans Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. Under the City Charter, the VAB's primary role is to advise the Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Services on all matters affecting veterans. The Board performs several additional functions, including community engagement, advocacy, and advisory and policy recommendations.

While the VAB has grown over the years, including legislation in 2022, which expanded the membership, its effectiveness has noticeably declined. This decline has been particularly evident in the public engagement sector. Having served on the Board for several years and had a hand in writing the 2023 report, I wanted to share my thoughts on some of the challenges facing the VAB. Although the VAB is mandated to operate as an independent entity, it heavily depends on DVS for both logistical and operational support. This support includes assisting with meeting locations, which, to be clear, is not in the City Charter so there have been instances where the Commissioner has turned around and said, look, the agency is not interested in helping the VAB find a location, and we've had to find locations by ourselves. But this is something that's not in the City Charter and actually goes back to Lori Sutton. Publishing...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So what are you suggesting?

JOE BELLO: I'm suggesting we're going to have to... and I get further into it, we're going to have to augment the legislation to where the DVS

absolutely has a hand in finding, particularly if, I mean, I know that they said they want to do it at VA locations, but VA locations are going to be quite challenging as well so are we doing it at the St. Albans CLC, out in St. Albans, are we doing it in the Brooklyn Hospital? I mean, Jason Loughran when he was here, testified about looking for central locations so I'm curious as to where we're going to find central locations.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, I'm sorry, you can go on with your testimony.

JOE BELLO: Thank you. This support includes assisting with meeting locations, publishing Board information, archiving minutes, videos and reports on its website. Unfortunately, this reliance has resulted in issues such as delayed meeting notifications, missing minutes, no transcripts, unarchived videos, and outdated or incomplete member information on the VAB web page, which I appreciate you bringing up that they updated that site yesterday. Additionally, as the Chair may recall, concerns were raised in 2022 regarding the potential influence of DVS officials on Council Speaker appointments. Those concerns have not diminished.

Finally, in recent years, many have observed VAB meetings being overshadowed by DVS presentations, leaving little room for meaningful local discussions. The meetings also seem to be constrained by informal two-hour time limits through video with minimal efforts by the agency to address veterans' questions from one meeting to the next, and that's the agency, not VAB. These issues have significantly undermined transparency and trust in the Board.

To address these challenges and strengthen the VAB, I would propose a package of legislative actions for the Committee to consider. Term limits. The lack of term limits on the VAB has stifled the introduction of fresh perspective of ideas. While some Board members have served for extended periods, others participate minimally, you've heard testimony on that further, further diminishing the Board's overall effectiveness. I also wanted to point out that the Commissioner did testify that start and end dates for the members have no rhyme or reason. They are not uniformly staggered. But in the last introduction, where we introduced the (INAUDIBLE), it was the Commissioner that that was pushing for these term limits and that appointees

only serve the remainder of unexpired terms left by their predecessors. That's been a problem. I would propose legislation and allowing new appointees to serve full three-year terms from the date of their appointment. This would ensure appointees have adequate time to contribute meaningfully to the Board while reducing any perceived influence from the agency or the stakeholders. Additionally, I recommend introducing two-term six-year limits for Board members. This change would foster fresh leadership, ensure continuity, infusion of new ideas and help the VAB remain dynamic and responsive in addressing the needs of New York City veterans. The City Charter calls for the VAB to elect a Chair and Vice Chair annually. To strengthen governance and improve documentation, I would recommend legislation codifying the position of secretary and amending the Charter to extend the term of each officer instead of annually to two years, allowing for greater continuity and stability. Additionally, the lack of a legislated DVS liaison to the VAB has caused frequent turnover in this role, which disrupts continuity and support. Since 2008, the VAB's annual reports have consistently called for funding resources from DVS to

support record keeping and ensure continuity. In the absence of dedicated funding in the upcoming '26 budget, I propose legislation that would designate a DVS position, probably intergov, to the position as liaison to the VAB as well as mandating meeting location support. This position with defined duties would ensure dedicated communication and operational support for the Board. Expanding outreach is essential to increasing awareness of the VAB's role and encouraging greater participation. Currently, the Charter only requires DVS to post VAB meeting notifications on its web page at least one week prior to each public meeting, and I want to note here that I went back during this hearing and looked at X and the last time they posted on Twitter/X about a VAB meeting was February 21, 2024. However, many veterans do not frequently check DVS' website, leaving them unaware of the Board's meetings or purpose, which limits its reach and impact. Additionally, DVS is required to maintain and periodically update contact information for veteran organizations within the city and notify them of meeting details by regular or electronic mail. During my tenure on the board, particularly as secretary, I never saw evidence that

this requirement was ever met. I recommend legislation requiring meeting notifications be published at least two weeks in advance and are included in the last two editions of DVS's Friday newsletter, prior to the meeting date. It's worth noting that the last oversight hearing before today occurred in 2017. To ensure the VAB is fulfilling its mandate, I recommend this Committee hold oversight hearings at least every two years. Regular oversight hearings will provide an opportunity to assess the Board activities, deficiencies, and to give the VAB a voice to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the veterans' community.

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Very good. And I like the, you know, I'm reading, I know you were rushing through it, but there's some very good recommendations here, which I think will stabilize

the Board. But we go back to the budget, that they have no money.

JOE BELLO: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I mean that they can't even provide, you know, refreshments.

JOE BELLO: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's a disgrace.

JOE BELLO: Yeah, again, we've had it in the annual report since 2018 when Commissioner was on.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But I'll hear recommendations from you and from the VAB about what would be a functioning, you know, a functioning budget that they could have, and it could be, you know, 5,000 dollars, it could be 500. I don't know. I don't know what that number would be, but I agree that we should have staff on DVS to just facilitate and work with the board because they're stretched now. It all goes back to increasing the budget of DVS, which if we did that, we'd at least have a fighting chance to have a very, very functional Board, but you can't have that when you make it tough on the Board members and they show up and they don't even get a glass of water or a bottle.

JOE BELLO: One of the things, just to point out real quickly, one of the things that before I left the Board that had started to be discussed, because remember, we going into the pandemic, everybody went on Zoom, so one of the things coming out of it, and I never really got to say this, but I think it's worth noting, is one of the things that the VAB should consider is that the Board members, if they cannot make it, can be on the Zoom. But wherever the meeting is taking place, the representatives of those boroughs, of that borough, should be physically at that meeting so, if it's in Staten Island, the Staten Island members should be there. If it's in Queens, they should be physically there.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, these are good suggestions. We'll talk about it with the Veteran Advisory Board, but we really need some ideas on the bylaws, and all this could be mentioned in the bylaws, which I...

JOE BELLO: Well, I will tell you, I wrote the last set of bylaws, and if you saw it, in 2017 so it does need to be updated. I mean, really, it does need to be updated as the Board has grown so that's

something I think the leadership is aware of, and I'm sure they'll take up as well.

And I'd like to make one more point around CUNY. I testified several years ago to your predecessor that one of the issues around CUNY is that each CUNY president runs their campus like a fiefdom to some extent, and so what they're concerned about is numbers on their campus and so what are they concerned about? The student veterans on their campus. The VA has also seen some changes over the years where now it's more reporting. So central office, to me, has become more of a reporting mechanism from the campuses to them, but I mean, I know the Commissioner would probably know better because he speaks to the chancellor and vice chancellor in his travels when he takes pictures with them.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Joe.

JOE BELLO: Thank you.

TIMOTHY PENA: Good afternoon, Chairman Holden, Members of the City Council and guests and veterans. My name is Timothy Pena. I run an organization called Veterans Justice Project, also the Forgotten Veteran. I've been in New York City

about two and a half years coming here from Phoenix.
I had in 2016...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Can you pull the mic
a little closer to you.

TIMOTHY PENA: 2016, I became homeless and
entered into a VA transitional program called Grant
and Per Diem Program. I also participated with the
Arizona Veterans Advisory Board on numerous
occasions. While at Mana House, the GPD program in
Phoenix, I was the front desk clerk for a year and a
half providing transitional services to homeless
veterans. I was also the photojournalist and I was
the outreach coordinator with about 100 to 125 visits
from veterans in the streets, camps and shelters.
That was our job. That's what we did as veterans in
the VA system receiving VA benefits. I'm a disabled
vet. So, when I came to New York, I was expecting the
same program. What I got was a violent shelter run by
Department of Homeless Services. Not Catholic
Charities, not Tunnels to Towers, Department of
Homeless Services. It should be said that the
Department of Homeless Services is not going to
provide us services. Period. Because they are
literally working themselves out of a job. Every time

a veteran leaves Borden Avenue, it's one less veteran on the street. And if you take all those 700 veterans who are in shelters around the city and you put them in housing, we wouldn't need to be here. One of the things that I have noticed that there seems to be two distinct types of veteran services in New York City. You have City-run services, such as Department of Homeless Services, Department of Veterans Services, Institute for Community Living, and then you have the advocacy groups, such as Veterans Advisory Board and the Veterans Task Force. My experience with the Veterans Advisory Board has not been pleasurable. When I attempted to bring attention to the way that I was being treated in the shelter in a VA program, I was ignored. You were at the meeting, so was Mr. Bello, when we were taken out of the main room and somebody said to the effect of, did anybody get that disgusting email from Pena? The email was sent only after I was ignored by the Veterans Advisory Board. And yes, the photos were taken inside of the shelter. Yes, the dead bodies, the photos were taken inside the shelter. They were disgusting. They are disgusting. And the conduct is still continuing on. We have no friends in this city. As a homeless, and I

believe I'm one, if not the only veteran, who has experienced homelessness in New York City, but also worked the front desk of a successful transitional program in Phoenix, we cannot depend on our Advisory Board nor our Veterans Task Force because we're not saying what they want to hear so we're ignored. Then when our frustrations get the better of us, then we're shown outward disdain. And we have had an awful lot of discussion today on access to the veterans. If you want to talk to the veterans, we are here. We want to be here. We are waiting for you to show up, but you won't show up. And when we do show up, DHS will not let us in. I think you experienced that yourself. DHS will not let us in. Last week, I showed up with Francesca DiPaolo, Homes for Veterans. She has spearheaded numerous donations for Borden Avenue. We showed up with 75-dollars' worth of coffee. We had to serve it out on the bench in 27-degree temperatures because DHS would not let us in the door.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, let me just tell you, Timothy. We were delivering coats and with the Vietnam vets at Borden a few weeks ago. They had to sign a disclaimer. Many of the vets didn't want to

sign a disclaimer so they had to leave. Even though we had collected, they had collected tons of gloves, jackets, coats, socks, hats, a lot of it worth, you know, 10,000 dollars, let's say, they had to leave. These were veterans.

TIMOTHY PENA: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: DHS, I'm not happy with some of their policies. We had to sign a disclaimer, and only a few of us would sign it because some of the vets say, why should I, I'm helping, I'm doing something here, I'm a veteran, I worked hard to collect all this, this is kind of an insult. So, DHS, I wasn't happy with that policy. I'm not happy that they're circling the wagons and it's disturbing so we just have to move on. I think Council Member Vickie Paladino.

TIMOTHY PENA: One point to that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, she has a question.

TIMOTHY PENA: It's coming in the front door and it's going out the back.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, we're experiencing the same thing.

TIMOTHY PENA: Yes. Yes, ma'am.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Timothy, excuse me, I need to be a little bit more educated on, you spoke about Phoenix in Arizona.

TIMOTHY PENA: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I am just very curious if they ran such a great program there, there's several levels to this question, why did you come to New York knowing that our services stink? I mean, if you were getting treated as well as you were getting treated in Phoenix, Arizona, I don't know what provoked you to come here.

TIMOTHY PENA: One, I'm born and raised in Arizona. We all have history from our old communities. It just wouldn't go away.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I get it. Okay, so you needed a fresh page.

TIMOTHY PENA: I struggle with suicide ideation.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Totally get it. Okay, understood.

TIMOTHY PENA: In 2016, when I became homeless and I went into Mana House, I filed my claim, I received my award. I left the VA homeless program. I moved into my own apartment. I was there

for five years before I came to New York. When I started struggling in 2021, like really struggling, I knew I had to leave. One of the things that I learned through the GPD program and the community engagement, including the Arizona Department of Veterans Services, was to be able to identify when I was going down that path again.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Got it.

TIMOTHY PENA: That's when I made the move.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Got it. Okay.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, Tim, we have some other people who are testifying. Thank you so much, panel. Thank you again.

We're going to go on remote. We have Dorothy Farley. Dorothy Farley.

DOROTHY FARLEY: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. All right, you can go. You have three minutes.

DOROTHY FARLEY: Okay. Sorry, I'm just putting on my camera. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Dorothy Farley and I serve as Vice President of Behavioral Health and Social Services for the Community Healthcare Network,

otherwise known as CHN. CHN is a federally qualified health center with 14 sites citywide that provide critical care and social services for patients in underserved communities. We reach well over 50,000 patients annually. CHN welcomes individuals of all ages, regardless of their ability to pay.

While our services are many, I would like to highlight the work we specifically do for veterans, particularly for their mental health. CHN's Military Family Wellness Program connects active and former service members to health and social services. Each participant is screened and assessed for mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder, by a licensed clinical social worker and can receive referrals for services like individual and family counseling and psychiatry, medication management as well as medical care. We provide dental services and other social services, including legal support provided by our program partner, the Veterans Advocacy Project. With the Veterans Advocacy Project, our program participants can receive assistance for public benefits, VA claims, discharge upgrade applications, housing support, and other civil legal issues. The Veterans Advocacy Project works closely

with CHN to ensure continuity of care and provide CHN training on cultural competency when working with veterans and understanding their legal needs. To speak to our program's impact, we have many Army veterans and one who was referred to our program to address mental health concerns and housing instability. Our social worker provided a mental health assessment, identified the need for a high level of care, and helped him schedule an initial intake appointment at the VA for treatment. The social worker also referred the patient to the Veterans Advocacy Project for assistance with rental arrears. The patient is now attending regular talk therapy and psychiatric appointments at the VA while receiving legal representation for his housing concerns. In another example, a 33-year-old U.S. Navy veteran and a single mother of two was referred to us, our program, given her child care and employment concerns. With CHN, she learned how to...

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Thank you. Your time's expired.

DOROTHY FARLEY: Sorry?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can finish up.
You can finish up.

DOROTHY FARLEY: Okay. CHN is a proud and honor to work with our veterans' community and greatly appreciate City Council support for our program. We are committed to its continuation and I thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Dorothy, how do veterans get in touch with you? What's the best way to contact your office?

DOROTHY FARLEY: Well, clearly, we have a public website and they can do that, and that would be chnnyc.org and it's very, very easy to do that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What about a phone number? Do you have a phone number?

DOROTHY FARLEY: Okay, you can call... I'll let you call me directly and then I will move you forward and that would be 212-240-2420.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, thank you so much.

DOROTHY FARLEY: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We have a question from Council Member Paladino.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: You're a non-for-profit?

DOROTHY FARLEY: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Where do you get your funding from?

DOROTHY FARLEY: We're a federally qualified health center, so we get HRSA funding and many City and State funding.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: So the City is funding a non-for-profit to do good work. However, the City is not funding where really, it's going to an outside source. The City is run by non-for-profits. Okay, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, our next remote is Claire. I don't, Claire, I didn't get your last name. We don't have it. Could you tell us your last name?

CLAIRE BARKER: Hi, good afternoon. My name is Claire Barker.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Barker, okay. Thank you.

CLAIRE BARKER: Okay, good afternoon again, Chair Holden and Members of the Committee on Veterans and all advocates. Thank you for your total dedication. Again, my name is Claire Barker. I'm the Intake Advocate at Veterans Advocacy Project, and I'll cut it down to VAP. VAP provides free legal

services to low-income veterans and their families with a focus on veterans living with PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, substance use disorder, and other mental health conditions. I have the honor of speaking with veterans and their family members daily. Unfortunately, many veterans contact VAP each day with their daily struggles. Few, if any, are aware that a Veterans Advisory Board exists, that there is a board that can give voice to their concerns. One of the major complaints made to our office is about how much misinformation is out there or little information or assistance vets find, sometimes the phones just ring when they're directed to another organization. Many veterans are frustrated with being passed around. Another issue that's a big one are evictions, particularly with our senior veterans. There are reports of being threatened, bullied, and daily harassment by certain landlords and management companies, particularly in the Bronx. And again, our veterans have a hard time finding someone to assist with these issues. I'll just give you a few. Facing eviction after living in an apartment for over 30 years, and we hear this a lot, it appeared landlords may want the apartment to have

it at a marketable rate because a lot of the veterans are there 40, 30 years with paying rent, 200, 300 dollars. Succession rights with apartments after living in the apartment and the family member pass. Illegal apartments, tenants sharing electricity. City paying for illegal apartments because some of them have vouchers. Veterans in the shelters waiting to receive services to locate apartments are being threatened with being removed from the shelter if they don't accept an apartment that is given to them or shown to them by the shelter. Veterans are sometimes immediately homeless when returning from deployment. Domestic abuse. There are no relocation services sometimes. I'll give an example. Survivor may have to flee the home only to be sued in court later for nonpayment several years down. I could go on, but I won't take up too much of your time. I'll cut to the chase. We as a City, we, all of us as a City, have to do a better job for our veterans. Some days I cry from the stories I hear. Veterans answered the call when they were called to serve. They signed a blank check, and the least we can do as a City is to ensure that veterans are aware, they have a voice, and that there is a board they can speak to.

Therefore, more mechanisms may need to be put in place to raise awareness as you've discussed all day, among veterans, that there is a board that exists. I read the Veteran Advisory Board vision, and it says it's for New York City to have the most effective local veteran policies in the United States. Please, I don't want to offend anyone because I know we're all doing the same thing. We're all trying to assist our veterans. When I say services aren't accessible, it's not that the service may not exist, but the veterans are not aware of the service and they don't know what's available. Again, there must be additional marketing. If you want to get the word out, I'm a good vehicle. I speak to veterans all day.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Claire. Thank you for your testimony. We appreciate your advocacy and thanks for testifying.

CLAIRE BARKER: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Are there any other people that would love to testify today? Anybody? You could sign up? Anybody else? Last call.

Okay. Thank you so much. I think we had a great hearing, good information. This hearing is adjourned. [GAVEL]

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 January 28, 2025