

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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December 18, 2024

Start: 1:07 p.m.

Recess: 3:57 p.m.

HELD AT: COUNCIL CHAMBERS - CITY HALL

B E F O R E: Robert F. Holden

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola
Kristy Marmorato
Vickie Paladino

A P P E A R A N C E S

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

Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner for Policy
and Strategic Partnerships at the New York City
Department of Veteran Services

Curtis Dorval, Digital Communications Manager at
the New York City Department of Veteran Services

Karen Loew, Chair of the Coast Guard Art Program
Committee at Salmagundi Club

Román Baca, U.S. Marine Iraq War veteran and the
Artistic Director and Co-Founder of Exit 12 Dance
Company

Coco Culhane, Veteran Advocacy Project

Joe Bello, NY MetroVets

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

Roger Walker, Program Director at the Samaritan
Daytop Village Veterans Program on behalf of
President and CEO, Mitchell Netburn

Timothy Pena, Veterans Justice Project

George Singleton, President of Disabled Veterans
of New York

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

Frederick Gasior, President of Vietnam Veterans of America in Manhattan Chapter 126, also President of VVA 126 Foundation in New York City

Frederick Hart, veteran

Michael Matos, United States Coast Guard veteran and First Vice Commander of American Legion Post 917

Armando Crescenzi, Put Veterans First

Gene DeFrancis, The American Legion, Bronx County

Raymond Ponce de Leon, veteran

Walter Wells, veteran

Sharon Brown Jeter, self

Leonard Williams, President of Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 32 out of Maspeth

Rabah Belkebir, veteran

Christopher Leon Johnson, self

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Sound check for the
3 Committee on Veterans. Today's date is December 18,
4 2024, being recorded by Danny Huang in the Council
5 Chambers.

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good afternoon and
7 welcome to the New York City Council hearing of the
8 Committee on Veterans.

9 At this time, can everybody please
10 silence your cell phones.

11 If you wish to testify, please go to the
12 back of the room to fill out a testimony slip.
13 Written testimony can be emailed to
14 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Once again, that is
15 testimony@council.nyc.gov.

16 At this time, we're going forward, no one
17 is to approach the dais. I repeat, no one is to
18 approach the dais.

19 Chair, we are ready to begin.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [GAVEL] Thank you,
21 Sergeant. I'm Council Member Robert Holden, Chair of
22 the Committee on Veterans. Good morning, everyone.

23 Today's oversight hearing on Connecting
24 Veterans with Arts and Culture Opportunities is a
25 very important oversight hearing. This is a vital but

2 often overlooked aspect of supporting our veteran
3 community, and it's a topic that resonates with me
4 personally, given my background in the arts. In
5 addition to our oversight discussion, we will
6 consider seven important pieces of legislation. It's
7 the most pieces of legislation we've had on this
8 Committee. Resolution 18, sponsored by Council Member
9 Vickie Paladino, calling on the Department of
10 Education to observe Veterans Day on Friday before
11 November 11th, if it falls on a Saturday or Monday,
12 or the Monday after it falls on a Sunday so if you
13 can figure that one out, we just want to make sure
14 that we have a three-day weekend for our veterans, so
15 it doesn't just, if it falls on a Saturday, we don't
16 have an off day so this is something I think is good
17 because it actually honors our veterans even more.
18 So, Resolution 311, which I sponsored, urging New
19 York State to establish a property tax exemption for
20 veterans with 100 percent service-connected
21 disability. This legislation, already passed by the
22 State Senate, would ease financial burdens on
23 disabled veterans as they transition to civilian
24 life. Very, very important bill in the Assembly, so
25 that's why we have to do a resolution, to call on the

2 Assembly to pass this. Resolution 465, sponsored by
3 Council Member Joann Ariola, calling on the New York
4 City Housing Authority to include an admission
5 preference for veterans in its next proposed agency
6 plan. That's a resolution, again, calling on NYCHA.
7 Introduction 686, which I have sponsored, to better
8 support veteran street vendors by expanding
9 representation on the advisory board and improving
10 access to critical information on agency websites.
11 Intro. 687, which I've also sponsored, to waive
12 commissary permit fees for operators reserving spaces
13 for veteran food vendors. Very, very important law
14 that's being introduced and being heard today.
15 Introduction 688, which I have sponsored, to provide
16 additional time for veteran service organizations,
17 VSOs, to address non-urgent building violations,
18 helping them maintain facilities that serve our
19 veteran community, and that bill, this issue has been
20 a problem for a long time where veterans are trying
21 to keep the VSOs open, they usually have a bunch of
22 obstacles, and when they get hit with fines, that
23 could sometimes be the last straw, and then sometimes
24 they close or sell the building, and that's a loss
25 for every veteran in the city so we want to try to

2 give more cure periods for building violations. It
3 seems like a no-brainer, but it is a law introduced
4 in the Council, and we hope to, like I said, hear it
5 today and get it passed in the near future. And,
6 finally, Intro. 759, sponsored by Council Member
7 Ariola, to provide critical rental assistance to
8 homeless veterans. Again, a bill that's common sense,
9 and should be law, but it isn't so we need to
10 obviously introduce that and have that heard in the
11 City Council.

12 So, I'm going to turn it over, once we
13 get a quorum, I can then hear our Colleagues, Joann
14 Ariola and Vickie Paladino on Zoom. Right now, we're
15 prohibited from that because we don't have a quorum
16 yet so I just want to talk about today's topic,
17 which, like I said earlier, was near and dear to me,
18 Connecting Veterans with Arts and Culture
19 Opportunities. I think that's a critical, sometimes
20 overlooked aspect that this Committee hasn't heard,
21 by the way, at least in my tenure, but it's a very
22 important aspect because it is, what it does for
23 veterans, there's so many ways it could make them
24 feel more part of a community, it could also make
25 them find their passion, their love, and when you

2 think that, obviously when you go through the arts,
3 and I've done that as a graphic designer and as a
4 arts major in not only high school, but in college
5 and beyond, that it really saved me as a person, the
6 arts, because I felt in my junior year in high
7 school, my arts teacher said, you have a talent and
8 you should go to college, and I wasn't planning to go
9 to college for any area, but he told me, he says, you
10 have something in the arts, and my career blossomed
11 from there and it can save you. It could make you
12 obviously feel self-worth that you have something to
13 offer and, like I said, you become part of a
14 community and make new friends and so forth and have
15 new horizons so I can't understate how important it
16 is to explore the arts that can uplift veterans,
17 their families and caregivers. Across the city,
18 there's some remarkable organizations. They're
19 already making a difference, and I'll just name a
20 few. The Theater Development Funds, Veterans Theater
21 Going Program, Exit 12 Dance Company, De-Cruit,
22 another organization, does great work, Poetic Theater
23 Productions, Guitar for Veterans. I can go on and on.
24 There's so many good arts programs. Programs like
25 these not only foster creativity, like I said, and

2 healing, but also builds a sense of community and
3 purpose, like I mentioned, so I look forward to
4 hearing from DVS and the leaders of these
5 organizations for their inspiring work and how we can
6 better support their efforts in the Council.

7 So at this time, I would like to
8 acknowledge my Colleague here today, Kristy
9 Marmorato, the Council Member from the Bronx. Thank
10 you for being here, and I also want to thank our
11 dedicated Committee Staff for their hard work in
12 preparing for today's hearing. John LaRosa, to my
13 right, the Legislative Counsel, does great work and
14 valuable research so, again, I want to thank him; and
15 Regina Paul, our Policy Analyst who comes up with
16 amazing ideas for our hearings and research; Ross
17 Goldstein, Financial Analyst; and my Chief-of-Staff,,
18 Daniel Kurzyna. He's talking in the back of the room
19 right now.

20 With that, I'll turn it over to our
21 Legislative Counsel to administer the oath to our
22 witnesses from the Administration.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL LAROSA: Please raise
24 your right hand.

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

6 ADMINISTRATION: (INAUDIBLE)

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

10 Thank you so much, and happy holidays,
11 everybody.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Before you start, I
13 was told that Council Member Ariola is on Zoom along
14 with Council Member Vickie Paladino.

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Happy holidays,
16 everybody, to those here and joining us on Zoom. Good
17 morning, Chair Holden, Committee Members, and
18 advocates. My name is James Hendon. I serve as
19 Commissioner of the New York City Department of
20 Veteran Services, or DVS. Thank you for allowing us
21 to testify at today's hearing about arts, culture,
22 and DVS' efforts in support of veteran artistic
23 initiatives across the city. I'm joined today by
24 Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner for Policy and
25 Strategic Partnerships and Curtis Dorval, Digital

2 Communications Manager. In addition to discussing the
3 arts and culture, we look forward to commenting on
4 the following legislative proposals, Intro. 686,
5 supporting veteran vendors; Intro. 687, waiving
6 permit fees for mobile food unit commissaries that
7 reserve space for veteran vendors; Intro. 688, cure
8 periods for certain violations by veteran service
9 organizations; and Intro. 959, providing rental
10 assistance to homeless veterans.

11 By way of background, since its inception
12 in 2016, DVS has long recognized the benefits of
13 creative expression in promoting recovery,
14 rehabilitation, and wellness within the military and
15 veteran community. We define the creative arts as all
16 forms of visual and performance art, written and
17 spoken word, dance and movement, music, and other
18 emerging genres. The creative arts provide veterans
19 with a powerful platform to process their
20 experiences, tell their stories, and connect with
21 others in meaningful ways. DVS continues to champion
22 initiatives that expand access to creative arts
23 programs, ensuring that all members of the military
24 and veteran community have the opportunity to
25 experience the transformative power of art.

2 The three needs for culture and arts.

3 Need number one, diverse funding sources. The U.S.

4 Department of Veterans Affairs has stated, creative

5 arts therapies improves cognition, semi-motor

6 functions, emotional resilience, and social and

7 coping skills. Creative arts therapy strives to

8 facilitate veterans' engagement in the community

9 while providing a sense of achievement and channeling

10 energies into productive forms of behavior. In

11 keeping with this spirit, DVS sponsors and amplifies

12 arts-related programs for partner organizations and

13 works with them to secure both private and public

14 sources of funding to make these important causes a

15 reality. DVS has participated in the Public Artists

16 in Residence Program, otherwise known as PAIR.

17 Sponsored by the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs,

18 PAIR is a municipal residency program that embeds

19 artists in City government to propose and implement

20 creative solutions to pressing public challenges.

21 Through the PAIR program and other philanthropic

22 offerings, DVS has collaborated with artists in the

23 following ways. DVS partnered with the Social Design

24 Collective's Women Veterans Portrait Project, which

25 printed portraits of local women veterans on paper

2 made from military uniforms. Working with Theater of
3 War Productions, an artistic company that uses
4 leading actors to present dramatic readings of
5 seminal plays, followed by guided discussions about
6 the plays, DVS co-curated 65 Theater of War
7 performances across the five boroughs. Productions
8 were held in public libraries, parks, museums,
9 correctional facilities, City Hall, and other
10 locations. Along with PAIR, our partnership with
11 Theater of War was amplified by generous support from
12 the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. DVS collaborated
13 with DE-CRUIT, a veteran-led acting company to
14 recruit veterans to learn Shakespearean verse, write
15 monologue in said verse, which addresses personal
16 trauma, and perform in front of an audience of
17 family, friends, community members, and other
18 veterans at the end of the program. DVS'
19 collaboration with DE-CRUIT was made possible through
20 funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and
21 later from the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund.
22 Additionally, DVS is leading efforts to establish a
23 Post-9/11 Veterans Memorial in Queens, honoring those
24 who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Global War
25 on Terror. The memorial will be built on the

2 waterfront in the Whitestone neighborhood of Queens,
3 the borough home to the largest number of post-9/11
4 service members who were killed in action, adjacent
5 to Little Bay Park. DVS, in partnership with the
6 Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art
7 program, is leading a public artist selection process
8 to ensure that the memorial appropriately reflects
9 the bravery and sacrifice of the fallen service
10 members from this generation.

11 Need number two, self-identification. As
12 many of you know, DVS takes the issue of veteran
13 self-identification seriously. To reiterate,
14 according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
15 FY 2023 Gross Domestic Expenditure Report, 34.3
16 percent of veterans self-identify nationwide, 29.8
17 percent self-identify in New York State, and 24.1
18 percent self-identify in New York City. It is
19 critical to acknowledge at this hearing the nexus
20 between arts and cultural activities and measures
21 taken to motivate our brothers and sisters and their
22 loved ones to come out of the shadows. Only when we
23 identify veterans can we connect them with the
24 support and myriad of services that DVS and its city,
25 state, federal, public, private, and non-profit

partners offer. DVS's weekly newsletter, which all are encouraged to view and sign up to receive at nyc.gov/vetnewsletter, maintains a portion dedicated specifically to veterans in the arts. Through the newsletter, we showcase veteran artwork and help support and amplify our artistic community. We create space for veteran artists to express themselves authentically. We believe that actions as seemingly as small as a newsletter outreach with an arts angle can have an outsized impact on encouraging our veterans to self-identify. We've witnessed time and time again that one of the ways to make a crucial first connection in inspiring veterans to self-identify is through the use of arts and culture. The September 2024 Greater New York City Veteran and Military Families Summit held at Yankee Stadium exists at the intersection between the services that our Department provides to the veteran community and our support for wider cultural activities. We successfully completed the largest standalone event in the history of our agency in the form of the summit. Details about this and prior DVS summits can be found at nyc.gov/vetsummit. Fueled by the lure of the New York Yankees, a local cultural institution,

2 DVS estimates that approximately 460 veteran
3 community members physically entered Yankee Stadium
4 with roughly 350 of those attendees being individuals
5 who came to receive the benefits, programming, and
6 services offered. The remainder were service
7 delivering personnel from DVS, the New York State
8 Department of Veterans Services, the VA, veteran
9 service organizations, and other community-based
10 organizations. The recent summit did not just help
11 our veterans, it created a footprint. This footprint
12 drew local, state, and national attention, proving to
13 also be one of our most successful outreach
14 operations to date. All those involved rose awareness
15 about the need for veteran services through this
16 gathering. We delivered great benefit to the
17 community, proving just how effective pairing
18 services with a cultural entity such as the New York
19 Yankees can be.

20 Need number three, continuing and ongoing
21 programs. In July of 2024, DVS Digital Communications
22 Manager, Curtis Dorval, an Air Force veteran and
23 noted documentary filmmaker, seated with me now,
24 helped to coordinate a National Veterans Art
25 Exhibition at the Salmagundi Club in Manhattan. In

2 September of 2023, our Agency proudly facilitated the
3 visit of The Wall That Heals, a traveling three-
4 quarter scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans
5 Memorial. Hosted in Flushing, Queens, this powerful
6 exhibit provided an opportunity for visitors to honor
7 the sacrifices of Vietnam veterans and their loved
8 ones, and reflect on their legacy. The exhibit also
9 included a mobile education center, sharing stories
10 and histories to foster understanding and connection
11 within the community. Lastly, our evaluation team is
12 reviewing our Private First-Class Joseph P. Dwyer
13 Veteran Peer Support Program proposals. We plan to
14 enter contract negotiations with art-related
15 providers, tied to the Dwyer funding program
16 opportunity shortly. DVS received 29 proposals, of
17 which five are categorized as being within the
18 creative arts. We are certain that this funding
19 opportunity will advance the creative arts as a
20 recognized modality for increasing connectivity,
21 building camaraderie, and reducing loneliness among
22 our veteran and military community.

23 With its focus on creative arts, the
24 Dwyer program leverages expressive therapies, such as
25 art, music, writing, and dance, as powerful tools for

1 reducing isolation, catalyzing companionship, and
2 promoting healing. Since its establishment during the
3 2012-2013 New York State legislative session, the
4 program has expanded to more than 25 communities
5 throughout New York State, of which New York City is
6 now one. New York localities receiving funds through
7 the program offer a diverse range of intervention
8 offerings aimed at empowering the armed forces-
9 connected community. As we review proposals for the
10 Dwyer Peer Support Program, including several art-
11 related submissions, it is clear that expanding these
12 opportunities will help further validate the creative
13 arts as an essential mode of therapy and community
14 building. By continuing to invest in these programs
15 and exploring innovative approaches, we can ensure
16 that New York City veterans and their loved ones have
17 access to the resources that they need to thrive.

18
19 Legislative proposals. Regarding the City
20 of New York's positions on legislation referenced
21 earlier, we have the following comments. Intro. 686,
22 supporting veteran vendors. The City supports an
23 additional seat specific to the veteran community on
24 the Street Vendor Advisory Board.

2 Intro. 687, waiving permit fees for
3 mobile food unit commissaries that reserve space for
4 veteran vendors. At this time, we're still receiving
5 feedback from the street vendor community on the
6 impact of this legislation. For that reason, we'd
7 like to engage with the veteran street vendor
8 community to further deliberate on the legislative
9 impact of this bill.

10 Intro. 688, cure periods for certain
11 violations by veteran service organizations. We
12 appreciate and understand the intent of this
13 legislation and its hope to provide much needed
14 relief to our veteran service organizations in New
15 York City. At this time, no such cure period exists
16 for non-profit buildings, but we're working closely
17 with the Department of Buildings to ensure that any
18 such violations that occur are handled with care and
19 attention to the conditions the VSOs are managing. A
20 deeper point, a root issue to DVS, is the fact that
21 younger veterans are not joining veteran service
22 organizations to the extent needed to ensure that
23 these VSOs, which own, manage, and maintain their own
24 properties, have the bandwidth needed to mitigate
25

2 challenges when they surface. We're actively working
3 to address this problem.

4 Intro. 959, providing rental assistance
5 to homeless veterans. While we agree with the intent
6 of this bill, it is important to note that the
7 housing subsidy proposed is already available to
8 veterans experiencing housing insecurity in the form
9 of the City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction
10 Prevention Supplement, otherwise known as CityFHEPS.
11 We advise policymakers to align Intro. 959 and any
12 legislative proposal on veterans housing assistance
13 with the current workflows and existing programs to
14 best serve veterans experiencing housing insecurity.
15 The goal of this Administration is to ensure that
16 veterans who have fallen on hard times have the tools
17 and support they need, such as CityFHEPS, to secure
18 and maintain permanent housing. To that end, the City
19 continues to work collaboratively to forge a future
20 where no veteran community member experiences
21 homelessness.

22 An aside, we ask policymakers to join our
23 efforts to inspire and motivate veterans to self-
24 identify as well. We've learned that the veteran
25 self-identification issue permeates through all

2 sectors of our community, including those
3 experiencing housing insecurity. One tangible step
4 that all City Council Members can take today, please,
5 on the intake forms that you use in your District
6 offices, ask the questions tied to Local Law 37 of
7 2024. These are questions that the Council, through
8 its leadership, ensure that all New York City client-
9 facing agencies now ask. Those questions, I'm reading
10 from the Local Law, question one is a question about
11 whether such person or any member of their household
12 has served in the Armed Forces, National Guard, or
13 Reserves of the United States, provided that
14 responding to such questions shall be voluntary; and
15 question two, an option for any person who responds
16 affirmatively to the question, indicate whether such
17 person consents to the Department of Veterans
18 Services contacting them regarding services and
19 resources for veterans.

20 In conclusion, we're grateful for the
21 opportunity afforded to our agency to testify on arts
22 and culture within the veteran community. We're happy
23 to answer any questions that the Committee may have.
24 Information on the art and community program spoken
25 about today can be found at nyc.gov/vets under the

2 community tab. Separately, we encourage all who
3 listen to and read this testimony to learn more about
4 the Department of Veterans Services offerings by
5 visiting nyc.gov/vets, calling us at 212-416-5250,
6 emailing us at connect@veterans.nyc.gov, and
7 following us on social media using the hashtag
8 @NYCveterans.

9 Two final things, one is organizations
10 that are interested in applying for discretionary
11 funding from the New York City Council, specific to
12 helping veteran and military families are encouraged
13 to visit nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding. We have materials
14 from the prior fiscal year and other information
15 posted on our website, nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding. As
16 soon as FY26 materials and the FY26 timelines are
17 made available, we will update what appears. The
18 information that appears now at
19 nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding is instructive for all who
20 are seeking funding through the Council discretionary
21 funding process. The deadline to apply for
22 discretionary funding from the Council will occur in
23 mid-February 2025. DVS, through its partnership with
24 the LaGuardia Community College Apex Accelerator
25 Program, is happy to provide technical assistance to

2 applicants. No veteran-serving organization can say
3 that they lacked the information or assistance to
4 apply for these funds. To all in the foxhole with us
5 on veteran and military family issues, please apply,
6 nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding.

7 Two, veterans interested in applying to
8 their local Community Board, community boards are the
9 foundational governing bodies of this city, are
10 encouraged to visit nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard. The
11 deadline to apply to join one's community board in
12 all boroughs except for Staten Island, where there is
13 no deadline. Application submissions in Staten Island
14 are rolling. Deadline is mid-February through early
15 March. Countless New York City leaders at the city,
16 state, and federal levels, including many in this
17 room, began their journeys by joining the local
18 community boards. Please visit
19 nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard and apply. Help ensure that
20 our people have a seat at the table.

21 Thank you, and at this time, I'll be
22 followed by Ellen Greeley and Curtis Dorval from our
23 team. They had some brief comments they wanted to
24 add.

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: I sit
3 here today acknowledging that we have hit an
4 extraordinary milestone in the development of our
5 agency, the long-awaited launch of the Dwyer Program
6 in New York City, made possible through the grace and
7 support of the New York State Legislature. I'm
8 humbled by the belief that our investment in the New
9 York City veteran creative and healing art
10 communities will accelerate their growth and help
11 them blossom into thriving, sustainable industries by
12 leveraging more public sector funding opportunities.
13 Together with our Dwyer providers, we can help break
14 down barriers that keep veterans from emerging from
15 the shadows and engaging in these critical health-
16 seeking and socialization programs. Standing on the
17 shoulders of our colleagues at the VA medical centers
18 in the Bronx and Brooklyn, as well as the Salmagundi
19 Club, organizations that have long recognized the
20 benefit of the creative and healing arts, we move
21 forward with a newfound energy and commitment to
22 bring these free programs to our neighborhoods,
23 making them accessible and approachable by our
24 military and veteran community.

2 I also experienced firsthand the power of
3 the arts to uplift those suffering from mental
4 illness. My uncle, who enlisted in the Marines with
5 the ambition of joining the Marine Corps Band as a
6 drummer, was killed in World War II at Guadalcanal.
7 My grandmother was brokenhearted by his loss and
8 diagnosed with depression. Encouraged to join the
9 Woodhaven Boulevard Senior Center, she often played
10 piano for the members, heightening her spirits and
11 desire to live. For many, like my grandmother, a Gold
12 Star mother, I truly believe we are paving different
13 paths for our community to engage, build camaraderie,
14 and find purpose to their lives.

15 And now I'll turn to Curtis.

16 MANAGER DORVAL: Hello, everyone, and
17 thank you for having me. My name is Curtis Dorval. I
18 am DVS's Digital Communications Manager. I am an Air
19 Force veteran, a father, a husband, as well as a
20 filmmaker, artist, and storyteller.

21 To help frame the conversation, I would
22 like to offer a few quotes for your consideration.

23 "An artist can show things that other people are
24 terrified of expressing." That's Louise Bourgeois.

25 "It would be possible to describe everything

2 scientifically, but it would make no sense. It would
3 be without meaning, as if you described a Beethoven
4 symphony as a variation of wave pressure." That's
5 Einstein. And lastly, "life beats down and crushes
6 the soul, and art reminds you that you have one."
7 That's Stella Adler.

8 I have a thesis. Galleries, shows,
9 performances, and artistic expression create and
10 foster culture and community. Pretty obvious, in my
11 opinion. In July of 2023, I received an invitation to
12 attend the Journeys Onward Military Veterans
13 Experiences Exhibition at the Salmagundi Gundy Club.
14 I mean, technically, the Commissioner received that
15 invitation, and I was there to promote on social
16 media, but I attended. After an opening ceremony that
17 included a dance troupe, performance, and a series of
18 profound poetry readings, we were invited to peruse
19 the gallery at our leisure. In line with the theme of
20 the show, artists and admirers were able to
21 intermingle, discuss, and reflect on the different
22 pieces, as well as their own experiences. If you've
23 been to a gallery opening in NYC, the conversations
24 that occur tend to be very cookie cutter. Comments
25 like, I like the line work here, or such an amazing

2 use of color, or I'm not sure I get it. From there,
3 it may pivot to intentions, or the message, or even
4 the method of creation. Essentially, the artist
5 experienced something, whether personally or
6 tangentially, and that experience motivated them to
7 create, and it called them to put that effort on
8 display for others to encounter. That is what I found
9 at Journeys Onward. A mixture of people from all
10 different walks of life coming together to share time
11 together and relate to the human experience, all
12 spurred on by the artist's courage to create and
13 share. It is for all these reasons that our agency
14 worked to help produce the most recent Journeys
15 Onward exhibition, and will continue to do so moving
16 forward. Because we understand the power of Journeys
17 Onward, a space for the veteran community to exchange
18 ideas surrounding topics and experiences that can be
19 viewed as controversial, and in opposition to our own
20 personal belief system. An inclusive space where our
21 community can grow and have agency over their own
22 narrative. A safe space to nurture and develop the
23 voices of those who volunteered to fight and die in
24 the name of this country. Thank you very much.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for that.

3 Curtis, I just want to ask your personal story. How
4 did you get into filmmaking, and what came first, the
5 Air Force, filmmaking?

6 MANAGER DORVAL: I appreciate that. It's a
7 long conversation, but I'll try to distill it. I came
8 to a crossroads. I was always involved in the arts, I
9 specifically loved acting, and I came to a crossroads
10 where I couldn't afford college any longer. I'd paid
11 for it out of pocket, and ran out of money so I
12 decided I was either going to join the Air Force, a
13 more stable career, or leave to go to LA to try to
14 make it as an actor, and I decided to join the
15 military, and here I am today.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, it's
17 interesting. Would you say that the filmmaking saved
18 your life, or brought you to another level, let's
19 say, in your life?

20 MANAGER DORVAL: To say saved my life, I
21 worry that that's an overstatement, but I think it's
22 true. I found my passion and my life beyond being a
23 father and husband in the arts, and specifically
24 filmmaking. That is what I love doing. That is what

2 I'm passionate about doing, as well as supporting our
3 fellow veterans here.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I think, at
5 least with me, it was, like I said in my opening,
6 there was an art teacher in my junior year that said,
7 you should get a job in something that you love to do
8 and not live for only the weekends like most people
9 do. In the arts, we don't live, if you're working in
10 the arts, we don't live for any particular day. We
11 enjoy every day, and that's what I found, and it goes
12 different ways, but it saved my life. I know it
13 because I was, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I
14 knew I wanted art, but people said, you couldn't get
15 a job as a painter, which I wanted to be, and make a
16 living, and so then he said, well, what about
17 commercial art, or at that time, it was commercial
18 arts, now it's graphic design so I went into that and
19 even the job I have today, as nothing related to art,
20 it's the furthest thing from it, let's say, but I
21 still enjoy designing, that I get lost in it if I'm
22 doing graphic design work, and somebody gives me a
23 job to do, or a volunteer, a poster. I say, I can do
24 that, and I love that more than anything so I can
25 understand how a veteran could get lost in it, can

2 find himself or herself, but it also gives, more
3 importantly, it gives you purpose and you have
4 something to offer, and when people appreciate your
5 work, you feed off that so it's a very important
6 aspect, I think, the arts. We should have had this
7 hearing a long time ago, but I'm always interested in
8 how people find the arts and making it, like you
9 tried to make it as an actor, and it didn't work out,
10 maybe. It's a tough, tough business, and it takes
11 several years. I, too, had the same situation, like I
12 said, with painting, but gradually it leads to other
13 things in the arts. Like, I funded the NEON program
14 in the Department of Probation, which exposes clients
15 and students to the arts, photography, poetry,
16 writing, whatever, and then I saw the most amazing
17 work, because I taught college for 40 years in the
18 arts, but I had students coming from probation that
19 were advanced beyond even college level, which I was
20 so thrilled with, and I continue to support that
21 program, the NEON program saves lives. I see that
22 because I've gone to their exhibits, and they're
23 amazing individuals.

24 But enough about my background. I just
25 want to, again, question some of the, by the way,

2 Commissioner, resolution, let me go back to your
3 comments on some of the testimony you mentioned. I'm
4 sorry. On the supporting of the bills, giving
5 veterans a priority in housing, that would be a bill,
6 that would be legislation. I would think you would
7 support that, in theory, at least.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think for us,
9 it's...

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know you can't,
11 maybe you can't say yes or no, but you could say, I
12 support the intent, right?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We can say that, we
14 support the intent. We're right with you as far as
15 what the intent is of it, Mr. Chair.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's what the
17 Administration tells us, by the way, all the time. We
18 support the intent, and then there's a however, but
19 at least, though, if we were on the same team, we
20 want to do the most for our veterans, and we know
21 about the food vending, and all the problems, that's
22 been a, we have to solve that issue with the veteran
23 food vendors, but...

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: If I may say on
25 this, with this one, the issues, the larger issues,

2 the self-identification is still a real thing, as far
3 as getting even folks experiencing housing
4 insecurity, to say I'm a vet, and then the issue
5 that's bigger than veterans is this vacancy, low
6 vacancy rate in New York City, as far as the housing
7 shortage, like 1.4 percent or so. These are things
8 that are the larger pieces here for us, but you're
9 right, we support the intent, but, right now,
10 CityFHEPS is something that is available to our
11 veterans, our team helps veterans access that, so we
12 just feel as though the larger things for us to try
13 to attack are this identification piece and just
14 recognizing that there's this larger issue that is
15 bigger than us about the vacancy rate being so low in
16 New York City.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, on self-
18 identifying, I know you do some announcements here
19 and there, but can you give graphics, maybe we can
20 design it in the Council, something that we could put
21 out to our membership, to our constituents, that
22 would help with that, to self-identify, and some of
23 the, at least in advertising, I come from
24 advertising, I know you have to give them a benefit,

2 the benefit, and tell the vets the benefit they get
3 by self-identifying.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We absolutely, and
5 to speak to that, and this is something we've
6 mentioned too, we're so grateful that we signed an
7 agreement with the Speaker earlier this year, we're
8 in the process of sharing our data with the different
9 elected officials. The goal is to live in a world
10 where you know all the veterans that we know who are
11 in New York City, and we're looking at getting that
12 stuff out no later than the spring, as far as to get
13 that to each of our Council Members, and with that,
14 if there are any assets or things where we can say,
15 hey, here's some suggested materials, if you're
16 putting out a newsletter, or in your general
17 newsletter, if you're doing any outreach targeted to
18 those veterans in your District, that we can get
19 those things to you so we hope that that's a way that
20 helps scratch the itch on self-identification,
21 working in partnership with all 51 of our City
22 Council Members.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and let me just
24 go jump back to the legislation again. Intro. 688,
25 cure periods for certain violations of VSOs, which is

2 a huge problem, as you know. That also, if it becomes
3 law, then it gets hopefully funding, and it's not
4 really a funding issue if you look at it. It's not a,
5 at least funding maybe for more Building Department
6 personnel. I don't think that would necessarily mean
7 so much in the way of hiring. I think it would need
8 just a legislation that would give the VSOs extra
9 time.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: A couple of things
11 to say to that.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's not dangerous,
13 like as long as it's not, the building's not going to
14 collapse, if it's a minor or something that's not
15 structural, that we would give them extra time to
16 cure.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: What's tough about
18 this, Mr. Chair, in my opinion, the root cause, and
19 this is just by observation, is we don't have enough
20 younger veterans joining these VSOs, and so you have
21 a situation where you have a VSO that is aging out,
22 and there's so many second and third order things
23 going on there so, for us, we're so focused on what
24 can we do to make this connection between the
25 transitioning service members of whom we now get

2 those DD214s when they're cut so now we receive the
3 separation paperwork when it's cut. As of September,
4 I mentioned at one of the hearings, we now get the
5 TAP data so when someone says, I'm leaving the Air
6 Force and I'm coming to New York in June of 2025, we
7 know who they are. So, for us, it's how do we
8 communicate with them, bring them into the fold, so
9 that that can become the next generation of folks. I
10 feel like that's the root issue that we're dealing
11 with. And then speaking to this...

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but we can do
13 two things. It's not like one or the other. It's like
14 if we want to give the VSOs extra time to fix
15 building problems and not pay fines, that's what this
16 bill is.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think the other
18 side of it is that these cure periods don't exist for
19 non-profits at this time so it's one of those..

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's what this
21 bill, no, that changes. This bill changes that.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't know if it
23 attacks the root issue, which is oftentimes that the
24 VSOs have declining membership and are aging out, and
25 we're trying to attack the root issue to which, and I

2 want to acknowledge, the person from our team just
3 gave me a note who's our transition services man who
4 deals with our transitioning veterans, Nicole
5 Orlando, who's seated behind us, who also is our main
6 liaison with the Department of Buildings. When we
7 look at these violations, many of the DOB violations
8 are mostly for boiler activities, so call that out,
9 so it's boiler-related violations, and many of the
10 OATH violations are those where the work may have
11 been performed but maybe certain necessary paperwork
12 wasn't filed and so just so we know what the nature
13 is of these things oftentimes so I just want to call
14 that out, and that we are working... (CROSS-TALK)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So let me just jump
16 in on that one. DOB, do they give extra time? Will
17 they do that, or do they just hit them with a fine?

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I know DOB's been
19 taking it case by case, and I know that there's one
20 standard across the board for these things. I know
21 that with the DOB side of it, for them, it's creating
22 materials to educate the different VSOs on how to be
23 able to stay up to code, things that may not even
24 know, where it may not be a situation where the cure
25 period is a solution, but just being informed about

2 the process is a solution, but it still ties back to,
3 if we don't have the bandwidth, are we able to... I
4 mean, the VFW post I was a part of, our Post
5 Commander, he was 90 years old, and he passed away
6 not too long ago so I mean, this is something that we
7 are living through right now and so it's like there's
8 these deeper issues. And then another thing that
9 we've been doing is we've been working to try to tie
10 in with the different unions that have this skillset,
11 boiler-related unions, to see if there's anything
12 they can do as having apprentices assist with
13 addressing these violations so this is something
14 we're aware of. We're trying to grind it out on this.
15 I just, I don't want to lose sight of the key issue
16 is the aging VSO population as far as those in these
17 properties and getting new blood in. That's the real
18 issue, Mr. Chair.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and some VSOs
20 have been more successful than others and we know
21 that that's an issue, but I think generally as the
22 veterans get a little older, at least the younger
23 ones as they age, maybe into their 40s, then they
24 become part of the VSOs. We've seen that the younger
25

2 ones maybe are busy with their families or lives or
3 jobs, and there's very little time.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to push back
5 a little bit, and I don't know if anyone else who
6 testifies is going to speak to this. I think what's
7 going on is we've got an older, like Vietnam-era
8 generation that is in the driver's seat at many of
9 these VSOs and the median age for a Vietnam veteran
10 right now is 78 and so we've got a lot of older folks
11 who have an older leadership crew, and you don't have
12 something behind that crew, and there's some
13 demographic reasons for that, but you just have young
14 veterans not getting into it. Demographically, we had
15 so many folks back when you had the draft so you had
16 a larger military, so there's a larger veteran
17 community that is older, and so that's a whole other
18 piece as far as we skew older as a community so there
19 are fewer vets but then you compound that with this
20 self-identification piece, with folks not self-
21 identifying, with folks not getting involved in
22 things, and it leads to where we are. My worry is we
23 provide the cure period extension, but the problem
24 just gets kicked down.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And it gets worse,
3 yeah, and I understand that, but again, like I said,
4 we can do both. You know, if we help the VSOs survive
5 a little longer or try to help them in, you know,
6 it's very small ways but, for instance, I have
7 supported and proposed that each VSO, every year they
8 get, we get a fund, let's say in the Council, 50,000
9 dollars. It could be for VSOs, Member items, so each
10 Member would get 50,000 dollars and we could give
11 that to the different posts in a way of a grant
12 through, it could be through your office or it could
13 be through the VA even on the federal level, but we
14 could actually fund at least some part of our
15 discretionary money to VSOs because they're so
16 important to keep open, and I have too many closed or
17 too many sold, and I have an American Legion post
18 that sits there now empty on my main area in Maspeth,
19 and that was sold and it's gone, but it was a center
20 of the community for such a long time for meetings
21 and hearings and so forth and for, you know, cultural
22 events.

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, I want to
24 be clear. We are lockstep with you on the spirit of

2 this. I just want to be clear about that. So for us,
3 it's really...

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's what I was
5 trying to get out of you.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, we are
7 lockstep on the spirit of this, and I want to be
8 clear about that.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, good. Okay, so,
10 or the intent, as the Administration uses. But let me
11 go into the hearing topic, the outreach strategies
12 that you have in DVS that you use to inform veterans
13 about available arts and cultural programs that they
14 could obviously join or participate in. How does the
15 agency ensure that veterans from all backgrounds are
16 aware of and feel welcomed by these opportunities?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to say a
18 little bit, and then throw it to Curtis and to Ellen.
19 Broadly, the strategy of our agency, it's embedded
20 within the mission. It's connect, mobilize, and
21 empower, and so a lot of it, the connect piece is,
22 how can we find these veterans and identify the
23 folks, those who are in the shadows or who are not,
24 and then mobilize is making them aware of what's
25 available to them, and then empower is to serve them

2 or to make sure that they are served, and so when we
3 look at arts and culture, how it fits into this,
4 among other things, it's a healing modality, yes, and
5 it has a lot of other things that benefit. It's also
6 that shiny thing that motivates our brothers and
7 sisters to come out and to be a part of things and so
8 we try to work with our arts and culture community to
9 be that beacon where folks say, look, I want to come
10 and be a part of this, I'd like to contribute to
11 that, and that brings our brothers and sisters, their
12 families out, and then we can be able to connect with
13 them so strategically, that's what's going on. I want
14 to defer to Ellen and to Curtis to kind of talk in
15 the weeds on how we go to the next step.

16 MANAGER DORVAL: Yeah, very simply, Chair.
17 The main thing we use is our social media and
18 newsletter. That is our greatest proponent of this
19 kind of information. That being said, yeah, that's
20 our information hub. That and being on the ground at
21 these spaces where veterans are physically located,
22 that has been the best driver of community and
23 culture development but, yeah, that information that
24 we try to push out there, whether it's through our
25 newsletter, whether it's through our social media,

2 really tries to highlight, especially in our artists,
3 so like our Veterans in the Arts section, which will
4 highlight potential shows that are for free to
5 veterans or veterans specifically in the arts that
6 are doing something in the artistic space, whether
7 it's performances, whether it's poetry, whether it's
8 graphic design, any of the above, we will utilize
9 that to highlight specific veterans in our community
10 and provide a space for them to potentially move up
11 in the professional world.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: May I add something
13 to that, Mr. Chair? I just got to say this.
14 Everything he said, but it's public announcements.
15 It's our Veterans Advisory Board meetings. It's
16 community engagement sessions we hold with veteran
17 leaders. It is Council hearings like this. It's the
18 different speeches that are given, etc. Those are
19 things. We're still a young organization, and we're
20 learning. So, one thing we're learning, I want to
21 call out, I think a group is going to speak later
22 today, is the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They're
23 going to speak. They had a Wednesday session a few
24 weeks ago where they opened up the museum to
25 veterans. Wednesdays are the day when the museum goes

2 dark, and so they open it up for select communities
3 to come. They had 350 veterans come, and one of the
4 things they did, the... (CROSS-TALK)

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) was that
6 the...

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is the Met...

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's the Met, okay.

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's (INAUDIBLE). I
10 remember the name. It was just 350 people came out.
11 It was their second time doing this, their second
12 year doing this, and something we're going to start
13 to do, taking a lesson from them, is they reached out
14 to elected officials and said things like, hey, can
15 you sponsor a bus to get folks out here, so you have
16 the cultural institution, which is turning the light
17 on, saying, hey, we're open, come through, but then
18 you've got the groups like us, we amplify the word.
19 We do what we can to spread the word to our Rolodex,
20 who we know, but then you've got us tying lockstep
21 with the electives, too, and others saying, hey,
22 would you support us physically making it possible to
23 solve that riddle of how do we get that veteran to
24 that place so I think you'll see us try to pull that

2 out as well and use that as another way to get this
3 to a good place.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

5 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: We
6 certainly will encourage organizations to contact us
7 for us to spread the word, and it does happen. Sorry.
8 We do encourage the organizations to contact us, and
9 we certainly will spread the word. We had an
10 interesting situation a couple of weeks ago. There is
11 a new opera called Grounded, which is about a female
12 Air Force pilot, and initially, we were contacted for
13 lower ticket prices, and because there was still a
14 cost involved, we couldn't promote, but I did ask
15 them if they ever thought about providing tickets for
16 free. Would they come back? We would be happy to
17 promote, and that did happen. Of course, it happened
18 only a day or two before the performance, which
19 usually does happen, but it's those types of
20 situations that do arise that we try to take
21 advantage of. Of course, then I turn to Curtis and to
22 Chuck, also on our communications team, to get the
23 word out, and that's kind of how we do it, but we're
24 very willing to work with all of our arts
25 organizations, cultural organizations also, to really

2 promote the work, especially for the veterans. And we
3 are embarking on something incredibly new, I think,
4 in terms of creating the veteran and artist genre
5 here in New York City, and one of the major areas, of
6 course, is that many of the veteran artists get a
7 wonderful GI bill to come to New York to learn their
8 crafts. This is certainly the best playground in the
9 world to learn that, in turn, become part of the
10 institutions, and part of our challenge, of course,
11 is maintaining the artists in New York City. As the
12 Commissioner mentioned, of course, the cost of
13 housing is quite expensive. I was quite involved in
14 the Peekskill community in Westchester for many
15 years, and they purposely created an arts community
16 up there, built housing for artists, offered generous
17 space for them, exhibition halls and generous working
18 space for them, and they did create a huge community
19 up there, which, of course, paid off in terms of an
20 economic multiplier. Restaurants are now populating
21 the downtown area, and Peekskill has come alive again
22 from that particular experience. I know there is
23 specific housing for artists in the West Village. I
24 think that those are rare in this particular day and
25 age. We also know that artists create these

2 communities, and then they get gentrified. I mean,
3 Lower East Side, Williamsburg, Bushwick now, which is
4 quite amazing.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Soho, yeah.

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Soho,
7 Long Island City, you name it, and they bring
8 economic vitality to the community, and we really
9 have to think of this as an investment so I will stop
10 there.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We see that the
12 American Alliance of Museums supports free museum
13 admissions for veterans and does a lot of work, but
14 again, the local museums, what's your experience,
15 anyone on the panel, with local museums, like the
16 Museum of Modern Art? When I went to school, in my
17 master's program especially, I hung out at the Museum
18 of Modern Art. It actually inspires you. You get a
19 lot of adrenaline going in there just looking at so
20 many images, and I think all veterans should take
21 that opportunity, especially if they're interested in
22 the arts and visiting museums, but now the prices are
23 very high, so if we can get, if you could give us a
24 list of, or somebody can give us a list of veterans'

2 programs with these museums, we can publish them. I
3 know it's probably a lot more than we know, but.

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: I would
5 say certainly the Intrepid comes to mind.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, we know about
7 that one. I fund that, we fund it.

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Exactly,
9 exactly, yeah.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But if there's...

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: A veteran
12 price to get a lower veteran... (CROSS-TALK)

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: There should be a
14 veterans price. There should be free admissions for
15 veterans if they show their ID or at least days, the
16 Museum of Modern Art used to do that for everyone,
17 like for students. They would have free admission or
18 reduced admissions, some of the other museums but if
19 we can do something for veterans, yeah.

20 MANAGER DORVAL: I will say in my
21 experience going to museums, my wife and I are both
22 veterans, and she's in the museum space at the New
23 York Public Library specifically but has worked
24 around, they typically do offer a veteran rate that
25 is very comparable to the senior citizen rate, but as

2 for free tickets, that does not necessarily exist in
3 the space. It's usually at the discretion of the
4 museum itself, so finding a program that does offer
5 free ticketing for veterans looking to experience the
6 museums is a great idea.

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to take a
8 moment or two to give roses to our Colleagues who run
9 the IDNYC program at HRA, where with that IDNYC card,
10 there are several different arts and cultural
11 institutions where folks do have free access, and I
12 want to acknowledge the Blue Star Museums program,
13 which is a program where from Memorial Day to Labor
14 Day each year, those who are still serving are able
15 to go to select museums at no cost and to list a map
16 of those museums. Many of those museums don't just
17 offer free admission to the military members, but
18 also if someone says, I'm a veteran, they also will
19 confer that so we're happy to look into that too, Mr.
20 Chair, as far as making sure folks know where they
21 can go for these things.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it's a few
23 phone calls, a list of museums and galleries that
24 might offer reduced admission or free, or veterans on
25 certain days. Certainly, when there's a slow period

2 or a slow day, we could try to suggest that, but that
3 would be good. So that's my second question on that
4 one, and you answered it about expanding it.

5 And this is the third, in what ways does
6 DVS ensure that arts and cultural programs are
7 inclusive, accessible, and accommodating for veterans
8 with disabilities, including mental and emotional
9 health issues?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Once again, I'll say
11 a little bit and then throw to Ellen and to Curtis.
12 For us, it has to be said that beyond Chapter 75 of
13 the New York City Charter, certain pieces are out of
14 our wheelhouse. So, for us, it's to assist and inform
15 veteran military families on areas of healthcare,
16 housing, benefits, culture, education, employment so
17 with the assist and inform hat on, there's certain
18 pieces that we can't touch when it comes to ensuring
19 certain things when it comes to accessibility and
20 just inclusivity so we work closely with the
21 Commission on Human Rights, with CCHR, on issues that
22 involve someone being discriminated against through
23 uniform status, and we work closely with our friends
24 at the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities as

2 far as accessibility issues so we kind of work
3 lockstep with them.

4 And then another thing, from day one on
5 this job, I've said that this is about moving the
6 bell curve of New York City's veteran community to
7 the right, the entire bell curve, and so with that in
8 mind, we work to market to everyone on things, and so
9 we like to think our contribution to this is often
10 getting the word out to all, regardless of race,
11 gender, disability status, income, etc., to get more
12 of our veterans and their families to be a part of
13 this so I defer.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great, thank you. Do
15 you want to expand on that?

16 MANAGER DORVAL: Yeah, sure. I don't have
17 too much to add here besides, you know, when the
18 opportunities are presented to us for, in this space
19 specifically, programs that are specific to veterans
20 with disabilities, and all inclusivity in that
21 regard, we typically try to promote that, again,
22 through a newsletter, through our social media. I
23 think recently we just had one that was with, it was
24 in regards to PTSD, trying to get veterans to resolve
25 those PTSD stressors through the arts. I can't

2 remember the specific program right here, but I do
3 recall us having one recently and us promoting it.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, that's my next
5 question for the Commissioner so I'll just, you know,
6 punt it over to him. What roles do arts-based
7 therapies and creative engagement activities play in
8 supporting veterans' mental and emotional well-being
9 as part of the DVS's broader mission because we did
10 talk about this. We did fund different programs, but
11 what do you see as being very successful where more
12 funding should be put towards what programs or?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to say a
14 little bit and then give it to Ellen.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

16 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: This is
17 her (INAUDIBLE) To me, it keeps going back to the
18 connect, mobilize, and empower. So, when I think of
19 these things with an eye towards, you know, the
20 Charter says we assist and inform, but to me, it's
21 two big buckets that we do. One is to identify our
22 brothers and sisters. Another one is to serve them at
23 the end of the day. And so when I look at the arts, I
24 see this as something that's a very attractive thing
25 that we can use to bring more of our people, you

2 know, out of the shadows into the light. They're all
3 the healing dynamics of it. At the same time,
4 strategically, it serves with helping us with the
5 connection piece so that we can immobilize and
6 empower folks. I want to, you know, just defer to
7 Ellen.

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: So, in
9 many ways, this is the essence of the Dwyer program,
10 and we are using the modalities of the arts to bring
11 people together and we hope that the arts are offered
12 by the providers in such an attractive way that
13 veterans will basically come and engage with their
14 fellow veterans, and we believe that that's where the
15 magic is in the room. Just as Curtis described the
16 experience, the Salmagundi Club with the arts
17 exhibition, we too believe, and we have piloted
18 Dwyer, and we do know that that experience is
19 happening so we just hope to amplify it with hoping
20 to, you know, use our funding for Dwyer to at least
21 support some of these five organizations plus the
22 health and wellness organizations that also applied
23 for the Dwyer funding at this time so we're really
24 excited. We're on the precipice of what I would call
25 something incredibly exciting.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So now we have to
3 come up with a way DVS has to, you know, start
4 collecting this feedback from these programs for
5 veterans so that's the next hurdle after we, you
6 know, we have to fund them, but then we look back and
7 say, what's the outcome here, what happened?

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yeah, so
9 we had experience working with MEDIS (phonetic) who
10 did a survey when we were doing our Theater of War
11 productions under the PAIR program, and I've used
12 much of that same study to create a survey to
13 distribute to the Dwyer organizations once we decide
14 who they are and right before they start, and we will
15 be collecting survey data from these organizations.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, like how many
17 veterans participated and what were the outcomes?

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yes,
19 exactly.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Certainly Curtis,
21 you've seen some amazing things with working with
22 veterans, right, and when they find a career or find
23 a possible career or find a love, what have you seen
24 in success stories in your experience? Like one
25

2 individual that picked himself up or herself up and
3 changed their lives.

4 MANAGER DORVAL: Chair, to find a specific
5 example on the spot right now.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'm putting you on
7 the spot.

8 MANAGER DORVAL: I'm struggling, however,
9 it does happen, and, honestly, when you see the
10 connection and you see the turnaround, it's like the
11 greatest thing in the world because you've introduced
12 a passion to somebody that has either lost it
13 previously or were really struggling to find it. A
14 great joy of mine is to see an impassioned person
15 doing the things that they love in life and really
16 just going to town on it, just like having a great
17 time, and that's all I got to say.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: My experience, I
19 taught college for 40 years, like I said earlier, in
20 the arts, and I would watch students when they first
21 came into the college and then by their senior year,
22 had transformed themselves and, like I said, they
23 felt they had a talent, something to offer, they had
24 something waiting for them when they graduated and an
25 exciting career, and anything in the arts, by the

2 way, to me is so interesting because you're creating
3 out of something in your head and you're making it
4 just like you make your films. You're editing and
5 it's a very creative way to do it, and then you see
6 the impact it has on the audience. You get instant
7 feedback. Instant feedback is so important in
8 galleries and museums that artists show. We feel the
9 best when our work is shown to somebody because we
10 live with it constantly and when it gets shown, you
11 change. You say, wow, and you get the feedback so it
12 pushes you and so that's why when you get to be my
13 age, you always start remembering those students that
14 you had that came back and they would say, Professor
15 Holden, you really saved my life, you really helped
16 me, you really gave me a career, I have now three
17 kids and I have a wonderful house and I bought and
18 I'm a working graphic designer and you inspired me,
19 and that to me is worth a million dollars because
20 that feedback is so important and so that means
21 anything in the, that's why this hearing is happening
22 because I know what it can do for a person, the arts,
23 and we underestimate that sometimes, at least many
24 times.

2 MANAGER DORVAL: I will add just because
3 you've given me the time to think here. Personally, I
4 wasn't necessarily going to go back into the arts
5 after I left the military and it was, to your point,
6 it was a specific professor, and I'll call her out
7 here, she's amazing, Monique Fortunet (phonetic) at
8 Fordham University is where I attended for my
9 undergraduate, and it came to a point where I was
10 going about doing my thing and I brought to her a
11 poem and she's like, are you an artist, have you
12 considered this, and I was like, you know, I have
13 this background and I don't think it's right, I think
14 I'm a little too late to the game having been in the
15 military for so long and now I'm a father and I have
16 to provide for my family and she pushed me. She
17 pushed me and she said, I think you should pursue
18 there, I think there's something there, you have a
19 message, you have something valuable to add to the
20 conversation, and that's really deeply personal to me
21 and I value her very much for that because it sent me
22 on the career that I have now and I absolutely thank
23 her for that.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I think most
25 successful people will tell you that, especially in

2 the arts, that there's somebody that motivated them
3 and went the extra mile to really take them under
4 their wing. I had that, you had that, you just
5 mentioned, but that's so important in the arts, that
6 the mentorship and then somebody telling you, hey,
7 you have talent, you should really work on it and
8 here's how to do it and here's how I can help you.
9 That's important, and that's always happened, I
10 think, with the people that I speak to who are
11 successful and especially in the arts, but there's no
12 city like us in New York City that have so many
13 museums and galleries, the center of arts in the
14 world, so this is where it's proven to help people
15 and like I mentioned, changed their lives. You have
16 any questions?

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: You asked all
18 my questions.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I asked all your
20 questions?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, may I add
22 something to what Ellen was just saying too, and
23 Curtis. Just about the measuring of success. I just
24 want to just temper this with, we're working with
25 partners, and so we're talking about Dwyer, which is

2 a program that we have control over, so we'll be able
3 to measure the success there. Even with the public
4 arts and residence program, we had controls, we can
5 be able to measure success there. Yet there are
6 hundreds, if not thousands of cultural institutions,
7 large and small, throughout the city so it's
8 difficult for us to have that second layer of it
9 where we promote and spread the word, yet for us to
10 really know the efficacy, that's difficult. We're
11 going to try to wrap our heads around it, but I want
12 to acknowledge the task that is at hand. Another
13 thing I wanted to say, something that Curtis just got
14 me thinking, just to be said, all creation, all
15 expression is art, and so we just want to sit here
16 and acknowledgement of that, large and small, like
17 any types of measures are forms of art and we think
18 about that, and something, we were talking about this
19 beforehand, we knew we wouldn't have time to cover
20 this fully, so I just want to put a framework out
21 there, just as something in the back of your mind and
22 those who are listening to this hearing. The
23 precursors for this conversation, the self-identity
24 issue with the veterans is real as far as the number
25 of our vets who don't self-identify. New York City is

2 a mecca for art. I want to recognize its role as far
3 as what this city is, as a gem, and we all create
4 art, we all consume art, and so that is the
5 framework. With that, buckets for us, is looking at
6 the creators of art, those who create it for healing
7 purposes, those who create it for commercial
8 purposes, and another piece is to look at the
9 consumers of art, those who consume it for healing
10 purposes, those who consume it for commercial
11 purposes. We want to just be mindful of the workforce
12 aspect here. There's an entire workforce associated
13 with this. We knew we wouldn't have time to discuss
14 that. That's a whole other piece. And then when it
15 comes to objectives, we think about one of the
16 objectives is, how do we increase the number of
17 veteran community creators and veteran community
18 consumers of art, and then another objective, and
19 Curtis pointed this one out, decreasing the civilian
20 veteran gap in these things, and so for us, when we
21 look at this broader conversation, which has so many
22 different branches and sequels, just want to
23 acknowledge that aspect of it and just pay homage to
24 the workforce component as well in addition to other
25 pieces.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. Just to
3 piggyback some of that, I'm going to ask you a
4 question here. You should say the answer to this
5 question is money or funding, but what additional
6 resources or support would enable DVS to expand and
7 improve the arts and cultural opportunities offered
8 to veterans and how might the City Council assist in
9 this effort? We can assist in publicity, like I
10 mentioned, but we could also assist in funding, but
11 what else could we do?

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to flip the
13 money thing, and this is something I've said in prior
14 sessions. You give us a choice. If you say, James has
15 a dollar, do we give the dollar to the community, do
16 we give the dollar to DVS? I'll say, give it to the
17 community. Dwyer has gotten us to a place where we
18 believe that we're developing, cultivating muscle
19 memory amongst our veterans serving organizations to
20 apply for money from the City. So much work was done
21 to get folks to a point where they can go through all
22 the traps to be good with PASSPort and get pre-
23 qualified for certain things to apply for Dwyer. You
24 may very well see many of those same institutions
25 taking a shot on goal once February comes and it's

2 time for Council discretionary money, and we're going
3 just like the end of this testimony, where I took
4 time to say, go to nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding to learn
5 how to do this. We don't want any organization to
6 say, I didn't know and I didn't have help. We're
7 working to make sure they know and we're working to
8 make sure they have help so what we want to do, I
9 want to be in a place where we can flood the box with
10 veterans serving entities who are saying we are
11 requesting Council funding, Mr. Chair, so for you,
12 the most important thing that I would ask right now
13 is to try to load up more money in the back of that
14 truck so that we can help our brothers and sisters
15 and so I'd say that's the place we're doing our end.
16 We will socialize left and right, coming into the
17 next discretionary funding deadline to have folks
18 apply, and we just ask that when that comes, that we
19 have more resources on the Council side to receive
20 this so that's my thought.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Again, on that topic
22 of what we can do as a City Council, do you see any
23 legislative actions that we could do to enable DVS to
24 expand and improve the arts and cultural

2 opportunities in institutions possibly, like a
3 legislation requiring reduced admission to museums?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Like I say, it's not
5 that the ideas aren't there, and this is just me
6 speaking, I feel like I'm so focused on certain
7 things because the power of the Council is it's money
8 and it's legislation and, for me, I'm focusing on the
9 money as far as that piece right now, because we
10 brainstormed, we couldn't think of anything that's
11 substantive, realistic they can get through right now
12 on the legislative side so, for me, it's the better
13 ask, if there's only one wish I can give to the genie
14 right now, it would be more money on the table for
15 these veterans serving groups and we will do what we
16 can to get our community to come and take advantage.
17 That's been missing for years as far as us applying
18 for Council funding. I want to change that narrative.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. So ask for
20 some more, but we should double or triple your
21 budget. How's that?

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We will always
23 accept more. We will never turn down more resources...

24 (CROSS-TALK)

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, you get 5 million
3 and change now and it should be 20 million.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We will never turn
5 down more but, to be clear...

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know.

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: But you know me, if
8 it's a choice between the dollar going to our people
9 and the dollar going to us.. (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE)

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Give the dollar to
12 the people. You know, just, you know, and we want to
13 give you and the Committee the leverage to say, hey,
14 look at all these veterans who are now applying. We
15 have so many folks who are ready to go who are just
16 knocking on the door. Give us the resources to fund
17 this. That's what I'm hoping we can do, Mr. Chair.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, I'm going to
19 challenge Curtis and Ellen. Certainly, let's come up
20 with some more creative ways in the cultural area
21 that we could expand and serve our veterans as a
22 Council so, if you have, you know, I'm offering that,
23 here's what I'm going to offer you, Commissioner, you
24 get somebody that calls DVS and wants to know about
25 going into the arts, you give them my number. Really,

2 I'm serious. Because I could give them enough
3 information that, and I'll just do what my teachers
4 did and Curtis could do the same. Well, how do you
5 motivate someone to get excited about art, and how
6 should they proceed, and that's very important,
7 especially for our veterans and they deserve that and
8 they deserve certainly consideration and free
9 admission. If we can, you know, make that with City
10 museums, you know, that we have leverage over, yes, I
11 think we should do it, so.

12 Okay, Council Member Marmorato has a
13 question. Thank you.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: I think this is
15 amazing. I think it's great that we're doing this
16 because, unfortunately, I don't have that artistic
17 ability, but I do see how it can be very therapeutic.
18 I know my own child, how she really does enjoy, you
19 know, singing and acting and, you know, as we have in
20 common with both of our daughters, that it's really
21 like puts them out there and it's absolutely amazing.

22 Now, I was wondering, is there a way that
23 you can create a list for us of these organizations
24 that we can pass on to our local veterans? I don't
25 know if it's something that you already have

2 established, if it's on a website, or if it's just a
3 simple email.

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: I believe
5 I gave that list over to Regina from the ones that
6 we're aware of, but we also recognize that we are
7 birthing a new industry here. Let's not minimize it.
8 I mean, veteran art as a genre could really grow in a
9 lot of different ways, and a lot of it is about
10 bringing it really to the community level so that
11 it's accessible for people to engage and enjoy in. I
12 mean, it's a challenge. I live in the Northwest
13 Bronx, so I could tell you, coming into the city, I
14 have to think twice about, I'm sorry, Manhattan, we
15 always think about it as a city.. (CROSS-TALK)

16 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Same here,
17 everything to me is downtown. I'm in the Bronx, so
18 anything along is downtown.

19 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Right,
20 exactly, we go into the city. So the reality of it is
21 that we really do want to keep it. I know the Bronx
22 is filled with the arts in so many different ways. We
23 should really exploit it as far as I'm concerned. We
24 should have exhibitions of veteran art in all our
25 boroughs, all the time. We should really brand it and

2 really make it a New York City venture, in many
3 cases, and we started it with Salmagundi Club, and
4 you'll hear from our friends in a little while, but
5 part of it is really bringing it to the community
6 level, and that's what we're looking forward to.

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, the short answer
8 is, yes, we can provide that list, and we've provided
9 Regina, who's a staffer who supports the Committee so
10 we've got you.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Great, thank
12 you. And also, just to put on your radar, City Island
13 has a couple of art galleries in our district, and we
14 would love to see some veteran art.

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: That
16 would be fabulous. That would be great.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Yep. I think
18 that's perfect. Thank you, Chair.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. So, thank
20 you, Commissioner. If you want to add anything else,
21 if you have ideas in the future, certainly, Curtis,
22 we'd like to connect AND, again, if DVS gets a call
23 with somebody who wants to go into filmmaking, you
24 can maybe even talk about acting, too, because you
25 have some experience in that.

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We're going to keep
3 that in mind, because as we're getting a better
4 handle on the transitioning service members and
5 making that contact, so it's likely we will come
6 across another Curtis and so that's a very real thing
7 we'll take you up on, Mr. Chairman, getting a handle
8 on these folks.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes, we work on so
10 many good programs, and this is one I think doesn't
11 cost a lot and, if we could just steer people in the
12 right direction, that would go a long way to help,
13 certainly help our veteran community.

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: If I make the
15 shameless plug once again for council funding for all
16 who are listening to this, it's
17 nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding for those looking to apply.
18 That deadline will be mid-February. So, it's
19 nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding. We can provide technical
20 assistance as well. And for those looking at joining
21 a community board, it's nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard,
22 nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard. But that's another thing
23 where the application period is typically mid-
24 February to early March with the exception of Staten
25 Island, which is rolling so thank you so much.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I want to plug my
3 bill to have a veterans committee on every community
4 board that I hope gets through and, serving on a
5 community board for 30 years, we did have a few
6 veterans, especially from the Vietnam War period, and
7 they were very, very valuable for the community board
8 and were on several committees so if we had a
9 veterans committee on every community board, I think
10 that would also go a long way to self-identify so
11 thank you, Commissioner, thank you so much, Ellen,
12 thanks so much, Curtis, for your testimony.

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

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

2 If you wish to speak at today's hearing,
3 please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-
4 at-Arms over in the desk here. The card, like I said,
5 the Sergeant's over here, and he'll call your name
6 out, and you will be recognized and come up to the
7 panel. When recognized, we'll do three minutes to
8 speak on today's hearing topic, Connecting Veterans
9 with the Arts and Cultural Opportunities. That's the
10 topic of today's hearing so, if you keep it on that,
11 we shouldn't have a problem so please remember that
12 we will hear all testimony on this topic, both in
13 person, and we have some people on Zoom, including
14 two Council Members, right, and then we will turn to
15 in-person and Zoom testimony on the seven pieces of
16 legislation.

17 If you have a written statement or
18 additional written testimony, and you wish, like I
19 said before, wish to submit it for the record, please
20 provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant-at-
21 Arms.

22 So, we'll now call the first panel, okay,
23 Román Baca, Karen J. Loew.

24 Karen, you can go ahead first.
25

2 KAREN LOEW: Good afternoon. Am I loud
3 enough? Good, thank you. Good afternoon. My name is
4 Karen Loew. I am the Chair of the Coast Guard Art
5 Program Committee, otherwise known as COGAP, if you
6 like acronyms, at Salmagundi Club, where I am an
7 artist member and serve on the Board of Directors.
8 COGAP has been co-sponsored by Salmagundi Club and
9 the United States Coast Guard since 1981. The Club is
10 one of the oldest art clubs in the United States and
11 is located in Manhattan at 47 Fifth Avenue in a
12 landmarked brownstone in the village. Created in 1871
13 as a 501(c)3 organization by artists and patrons, its
14 mission is to support one another and to encourage
15 the advancement of art of all kinds. We engage with
16 the public with numerous programs centered around the
17 arts. Support of America's military veterans and
18 Coast Guard has continued to be an important part of
19 the Club's legacy. The main focus with COGAP is to
20 highlight the 11 missions and extensive training of
21 the Coast Guard through art. The artists are all
22 volunteers, giving of their time, talent, and
23 generously donating the works of art. We immortalize
24 in our paintings and drawings those who serve our
25 country in the United States Coast Guard. Wherever

2 COGAP art is exhibited, it serves to honor our
3 service members and to educate the public. Locally,
4 the program has the support of the New York Council
5 Navy League for the annual reception and acceptance
6 ceremony at Salmagundi Club, which helps widen our
7 public outreach. Coast Guard senior leadership
8 attends this prestigious occasion where they accept
9 the art on behalf of the Coast Guard and the country.
10 Following the exhibition at Salmagundi Club, the art
11 is on view for approximately two months at Federal
12 Hall National Memorial on Wall Street, where the
13 steady flow of tourists assure an even wider
14 audience.

15 COGAP has a national presence with more
16 opportunities for public viewing. Art is often
17 exhibited in maritime museums, in government offices,
18 and of course, the Coast Guard headquarters in
19 Washington. I'm also very proud of my COGAP
20 Committee's sponsorship of the Military Veterans Art
21 Exhibition at Salmagundi Club. We have brought into
22 the spotlight both visual and performance art,
23 increasing public awareness of the unique and very
24 personal perspective on the impact of military life
25 beyond active duty. Salmagundi Club provides

2 exhibition space and an impressive venue for the
3 reception program. We are most appreciative of the
4 support of these popular veteran events for the New
5 York City Department of Veteran Services, the Art
6 Student League of New York, New York Commandery of
7 the Naval Order of the United States, as well as the
8 veterans community. They all understand that our
9 military veterans deserve to be seen, heard, and
10 above all, valued. All these opportunities for COGAP
11 and military veterans' art on view increase the
12 civilian public's awareness and hopefully
13 appreciation of our military for all they do for all
14 of us. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Karen.

16 ROMÁN BACA: Good afternoon, Chair Holden,
17 members of the New York City Council Committee on
18 Veterans, and guests. My name is Román Baca, and I am
19 a U.S. Marine Iraq War veteran and the Artistic
20 Director and Co-Founder of Exit 12 Dance Company, a
21 New York City-based non-profit that uses dance and
22 storytelling to heal veterans, advocate for veterans'
23 issues, and educate audiences about the impacts of
24 service. For over 17 years, Exit 12 has proudly
25 called New York City home, leveraging the vibrancy

2 and diversity of this city to elevate the voices of
3 active duty military, veterans, and their families
4 through the arts. Our story begins with a simple yet
5 profound realization. The arts have the power to heal
6 and connect. As a veteran of the United States Marine
7 Corps, I returned from Iraq, searching for ways to
8 process my experiences and reconnect with my
9 community. I went back to dance, and it became my
10 outlet and my lifeline. Exit 12 was born from a
11 desire to share that transformative power with
12 others. According to the VA's Whole Health Program,
13 last year, approximately 41 percent of veterans
14 reported experiencing mental health challenges like
15 PTSD or anxiety. They also found that holistic
16 approaches, integrating physical, emotional, and
17 social well-being, like dance and theater, showed
18 promise in improving overall health outcomes. I have
19 dedicated my career to encouraging and engaging
20 veterans, both in the U.S. and the U.K., in the arts
21 and recovery programs, collaborating with esteemed
22 organizations such as the U.S. Department of Veterans
23 Affairs, the Department of Defense, the Royal British
24 Legion, the Ministry of Defense in the U.K. Holding a
25 Master's of Fine Arts in this work, I am now pursuing

2 a PhD to further explore how the performing arts
3 profoundly impacts and benefits the military
4 community. Since our founding in 2007, we have
5 presented over 125 performances across New York City
6 and internationally at prestigious venues including
7 Lincoln Center, the Intrepid Museum, the 92nd Street
8 Y, Walter Reed Military Medical Center, and West
9 Point Military Academy that have showcased the
10 personal stories of over 1,000 veterans. We've
11 engaged over 75,000 audience members with stories
12 that explore themes of war, service, and the human
13 condition, and we have released two short
14 documentaries filmed here in New York City detailing
15 our impact with the military community that won
16 national awards and attention while highlighting New
17 York City as a place where veterans could heal and
18 connect through the arts.

19 One of our core missions is community
20 engagement. We conduct workshops where veterans,
21 military families, and civilians come together to
22 create performances in art, fostering mutual
23 understanding and healing. This work is particularly
24 impactful for underserved populations like the
25 military community, offering a safe space for

2 dialogue and self-expression. One of our
3 participants, US Army veteran and New York City
4 resident Anthony Roberts said, how does dance feel? I
5 feel like Joe Cocker after happy hour, but that's
6 okay, I'm still very uncertain, very tense, until I'm
7 actually doing it. I've definitely felt a sense of
8 release, peace, coming to terms with what happened
9 through movement. The setting of New York City and
10 its unparalleled cultural ecosystem has been
11 essential for our success. It allows us to
12 collaborate with local arts organizations and bring
13 veterans and interested members of the public
14 together in community spaces that cultivate and
15 celebrate diversity. New York City is the world's
16 cultural center, and as such, we argue that it should
17 be an example to the world by offering world-class
18 arts to veterans. However, as costs rise and
19 resources become scarcer, we need continued support
20 to sustain and expand our work. I urge this Council
21 to recognize and support the critical role the arts
22 play in the lives of veterans and their families.
23 Programs like our annual workshop and performance
24 partnering with the Intrepid Museum are vital to
25 organizations like ours, ensuring that we can

2 continue to enrich the cultural fabric of this city
3 while addressing the unique needs of its veteran
4 population. On behalf of Exit 12 Dance Company, I
5 thank you for your time, your attention, and your
6 commitment to fostering a city where art, healing,
7 and community intersect. I invite each of you to
8 attend one of our eight-week creative workshop series
9 or public performance with New York City veterans,
10 their families, and the community. The next one is on
11 the Intrepid starting in April with our final showing
12 May 30th to witness firsthand the profound impact of
13 this work. Thank you. I'm open to answer any
14 questions.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, thank you both
16 for the testimony. It sounds exciting. I'll ask the
17 same thing I asked the Commissioner or the last
18 panel. Do you have some success stories where you saw
19 the transformation so graphically that that person
20 jumps out, that you saw a complete change? Román,
21 maybe you could, you've probably seen it in your
22 work.

23 ROMÁN BACA: Absolutely.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

2 ROMÁN BACA: We have worked for many years
3 with a Vietnam-era veteran who will tell you that in
4 Vietnam, he experienced the worst day of his life, a
5 rocket attack, where he was petrified with fear and
6 he couldn't act as he was trained, and that made him
7 feel guilty for every day of his life past Vietnam.
8 Last year on the Intrepid, he decided to recreate
9 that moment through movement and storytelling. In the
10 framework that we built working creatively and in the
11 practice that we've created, we surrounded that
12 veteran with support, with love, and he was able to
13 work with that until his heart felt still, and then
14 he was able to put it on stage in front of a live
15 audience on the deck of the Intrepid and give that
16 experience to others. A few days after that
17 performance, his therapist downgraded him from high
18 suicide risk to low, and it's one of the most
19 inspirational stories I've experienced doing this
20 work.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, I asked for it
22 and I got it. That's a very dramatic story, and see,
23 that's why we're here and that's why this topic is so
24 important because just to hear that story motivates
25 me even more because I get that, but I just wanted

2 everyone to hear that, how it saved the person's
3 life. Would you have something like that? I don't
4 know if you want to, you can top that one, but.

5 KAREN LOEW: Well, I'm not here to top
6 that. I'm here to applaud that.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, I know, but I
8 don't want to put pressure on you.

9 KAREN LOEW: Here to applaud that. I want
10 to digress to one thing you'd said earlier about
11 being in the arts yourself, and I've often used the
12 phrase that dead artists make all the money. The rest
13 of us have to work for a living so I understand your
14 interest in graphic arts as well. Mine too.

15 As an artist for the Coast Guard Art
16 Program, my own art that contribute is strictly about
17 the Coast Guard and it's about the men and women, the
18 active duty, not the generals, not the admirals, not
19 the officers per se. It's the everyday. And on one
20 occasion, a piece I had done was based on a
21 photograph in public affairs and it showed the back
22 of the serviceman reaching over to help someone in
23 one of those floating rafts out in the ocean. It's
24 first, it's a rescue mission before it's anything
25 else, and we didn't know who this person was. But

2 once this art becomes part of the program, it's out
3 there on the internet and this person contacts me.
4 And he said, my kids never understood what I do every
5 day. He said, your image helped explain it to them
6 and it's made my 12 years in the service all
7 worthwhile. Suddenly, he felt seen, and his family
8 understood what he did.

9 And on the veteran side, where we have
10 these shows at the Salmagundi Club, I've learned a
11 lot myself. I see the value that has for the public
12 of seeing the art, talking with the artist, hearing
13 their poetry and watching them come out of their
14 shell and want to engage with the civilian population
15 so that we understand better their life of service,
16 their commitment after that life. One of the first
17 times we did this, there was a woman who was part of
18 the VA who was an art therapist, a licensed art
19 therapist, and it was all about what art therapy does
20 and brings to this situation so she had a panel after
21 the exhibition and one gentleman said, he says, I
22 used to be a happy person so it showed what the
23 service had, how it had changed him and how art was
24 opening him back up to finding some kind of happiness
25 and peace in his life so I've seen that

2 transformation one by one in the arts that I've
3 watched and observed. It's been very powerful.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And that's the reward
5 we get for those programs. That's the feedback you
6 get and that's, you feel like a better person,
7 definitely when you provide that so thank you both.
8 These are amazing and it's on the record now so
9 certainly keep doing what you're doing and please
10 keep in touch with my office about other success
11 stories. I'd love to hear that and print those in
12 some publications so we can motivate others to do the
13 same, but both stories are amazing and, again, that's
14 why we do what we do because of the people that we
15 help. Thanks so much.

16 KAREN LOEW: I just have one other thing.
17 The Salmagundi, though it's not considered a museum
18 and it's a club, we are free and open to the public
19 every day, I think except Mondays, but basically the
20 hours on the website so there's a lot of art there
21 that's there just to be seen and appreciated and
22 perhaps you'll come by sometime.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes, yes, definitely.
24 Thank you so much.

2 KAREN LOEW: You're very welcome. Thank
3 you for having us today.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks.

5 Our next panel, Coco Culhane, Timothy
6 Pena, Joe Bello, Roger Walker, and Eric Lee.

7 Before your testimony, just state your
8 name for the record.

9 Ms. Culhane, yeah, you can go.

10 COCO CULHANE: Hi, Coco Culhane from
11 Veteran Advocacy Project. I don't have anything to
12 say about the arts. I've enjoyed listening to
13 everyone's amazing stories.

14 I just wanted to comment quickly on the
15 voucher bill so the written testimony we've submitted
16 offers technical amendments, suggestions, and I just
17 wanted to say, to advocate for it, that while this is
18 something that's technically available through
19 CityFHEPS, there's an opportunity here to create, go
20 the extra mile for veterans, and to basically create
21 something like HUD-VASH on the city level. Since the
22 funding is essentially already there for those
23 vouchers, why not make these specific vouchers
24 available through DVS, not having them run or
25 implement the system, not recreating the wheel, but

2 they do housing case management services. It's one of
3 their strengths. Why not tie that to these vouchers?
4 And then just in terms of specifics, in terms of
5 post-traumatic stress disorder, different mental
6 health conditions, going through the shelter system,
7 we know is extremely taxing. As attorneys, we've
8 tried to do accommodation, reasonable accommodation
9 requests to get people to skip those lines and things
10 like that in those processes, and it's extremely
11 difficult, time-consuming, and a lot of our clients
12 just give up. Getting an appointment at Homebase,
13 very, very difficult. I know there's a housing non-
14 profit that's about to hopefully hire someone to be a
15 veteran navigator for the Homebase offices. So, I
16 think there's an opportunity that this bill could be
17 amended with, it needs a lot put into it in terms of
18 definitions and implementation, but I think there's a
19 real opportunity and you'd be targeting a small
20 population that's still in shelter and does need some
21 extra assistance.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great, that's a great
23 idea. Thank you so much for that.

24 COCO CULHANE: Thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Joe.

2 JOE BELLO: Okay. Joe Bello. I was going
3 to testify, but after listening to DVS's testimony, I
4 wanted to at least clear the record on some of these
5 things that they testified that they're doing. So,
6 they claimed that they did a PAIR program with the
7 Social Design Women Veterans Portrait Project. To be
8 clear, that took place in 2015 prior to them becoming
9 DVS. That was the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs.
10 Their PAIR with the Theater of War, that happened in
11 2017. Their collaboration with DE-CRUIT, as the
12 Commissioner is aware, this came up at a VAB meeting
13 two years ago, and subsequently they never did any
14 outreach. They received funding from NYU, but DVS
15 never did outreach on DE-CRUIT's behalf.

16 Additionally, as I said in the previous hearing that
17 we did regarding the Post 9/11 Veterans Memorial, I
18 submitted a FOIA to DVS with a number of questions,
19 because there's been no transparency around that Post
20 9/11 Memorial, and they are telling me that they will
21 get me results, they will get me some answers,
22 hopefully by February 26th of 2025. So once again, in
23 fact, after that hearing, about a week later, they
24 then posted the names of the members of the board so
25 they hadn't even done that until after the testimony.

2 The other thing I would say too is, so we
3 had a DVS individual here named Curtis Dorval. A lot
4 of veterans don't know who he is. I mean, I know he
5 runs the social media. I know it, but a lot of
6 veterans don't. I would have recommended that perhaps
7 in one of those Friday newsletters they put out, he
8 should introduce himself to the community. I've met
9 him at a couple of events, so I do know who he is,
10 but I know most of the community does not. And other
11 than that, the only thing I would say about the
12 Intros and bills, currently I can't support them as
13 is because they are vague and they need a lot of
14 work, and I think a lot of testimony, like what you
15 just heard, around them, but you have my testimony,
16 particularly on arts and how important it is, and
17 I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: If you could also
19 come up with, if you have some suggestions for the
20 bills, that's why we have a hearing on it, and then
21 we go back and we adjust it.

22 JOE BELLO: Yeah.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So it would be A or
24 B, we would move the bill, but there would be
25 amendments, certainly so if you could..

2 JOE BELLO: I mean, I do have suggestions
3 for the bills, particularly like the, in talking to a
4 number of the vendors on those bills and a couple of
5 the other ones, but, you know, we could talk and I'll
6 say that.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, if you have
8 time, if you could put it in an email, we'll
9 certainly include it, a suggestion and discuss it so
10 that'd be good. Thanks, Joe.

11 JOE BELLO: You got it. Eric.

12 ERIC LEE: Hi, good afternoon. Thank you,
13 Chair Holden and Members of the Committee for the
14 opportunity to testify today. My name is Eric Lee.
15 I'm the Director of Public Policy at Volunteers of
16 America, Greater New York, or VOAGNY for short. We
17 are a 128-year anti-poverty organization serving over
18 750 veterans every year. I submitted written
19 testimony for the record, which I will briefly
20 summarize. VOAGNY appreciates the Council's continued
21 leadership and commitment to supporting veterans who
22 served our country, and we support Intro. 959, which
23 will expand access to rental assistance to more
24 veterans experiencing the trauma of homelessness. A
25 significant number of veterans who experience

2 homelessness struggle because they do not qualify for
3 federally funded supportive services for veteran
4 families, or SSVF services, or rental assistance
5 through HUD-VASH due to their discharge status,
6 length of service, or branch in which they served. To
7 ensure that this legislation is as effective as
8 possible and can assist veterans who served in the
9 National Guard, but were not called up for active
10 duty, we recommend changing the definition for
11 veteran to mirror the CityFHEPS rule as defined, "a
12 person who has served in the armed forces of the
13 United States." We applaud the idea of having the New
14 York City Department of Veterans Services administer
15 the voucher to ensure a no-wrong-door approach. This
16 would ensure that veterans can apply through programs
17 where they feel most comfortable. We also encourage
18 the new program to accept direct referrals from SSVF
19 programs to enable warm handoffs for veterans who do
20 not qualify for federal resources. VOA has an SSVF
21 program that does community outreach, and this would
22 be a great tool. We recommend removing the proof of
23 residency requirement, which could be a barrier to
24 services, particularly for veterans experiencing
25 unsheltered homelessness. Many lose important

2 documents or identification due to street sweeps and
3 may not be the best personal historians that can
4 provide a complete housing history so it takes time
5 to replace documents and verify fragmented address
6 histories, which prolongs the experience of
7 homelessness for service members. Finally, we
8 recommend increasing the income limit for
9 discontinuance of the voucher up to 80 percent of the
10 area median income from the proposed 200 percent
11 federal poverty limit. This would mirror CityFHEPS
12 limits and will enable veterans to earn more income
13 to become self-sufficient and be able to afford rent
14 before they step off the program. Thank you for the
15 opportunity to testify.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Can I just ask you a
17 question while I'm on this? The street sweeps that
18 you see, does that happen quite often where all the
19 materials are thrown out, and what do you have to do
20 then after that to catch up?

21 ERIC LEE: It happens, I want to say it's
22 a regular process which the City does either through
23 NYPD, Parks Department, Sanitation, and in
24 conjunction with the Department of Homeless Services
25 outreach teams, but they could also do them

2 separately so they might not have DHS outreach there,
3 they may just have Sanitation. It can happen in a
4 couple different ways where it could be an urgent
5 cleanup if there's like a health and safety concern,
6 or they could give more advanced notice where they
7 post a sign and say that we will do a cleanup in the
8 coming days and weeks to try to give the people their
9 time to gather their belongings and move on or find
10 somewhere else to come inside. But the challenge with
11 that is that when people start cleaning up things,
12 important documents can be thrown out, even if the
13 person is saying, please don't throw that out, and
14 the Sanitation worker is not a caseworker, he's going
15 to pick everything up and just put it in the garbage
16 truck so it does lose ground then, because then
17 caseworkers working with the client need to either
18 apply...

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Start again, and
20 yeah, it might take weeks or months even.

21 ERIC LEE: Yeah.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, thank you
23 so much.

24 ERIC LEE: Thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Roger.

2 ROGER WALKER: Good afternoon. My name is
3 Roger Walker. I'm the Program Director at the
4 Samaritan Daytop Village Veterans Program. I'm here
5 today on behalf of President and CEO, Mitchell
6 Netburn and so I'd like to speak about a couple of
7 things.

8 First, I'd like to thank you for the
9 opportunity to speak at today's hearing for your
10 dedication to supporting our veterans through bills
11 and resolutions aimed at creating stable job and
12 housing opportunities. I'm honored to highlight the
13 crucial role that arts and culture play in our
14 mission to support and uplift veterans at Samaritan
15 Daytop Village. At Samaritan Daytop Village, we
16 believe that true healing encompasses the mind, body,
17 and soul. The arts have proven to be a vital tool in
18 this journey, offering our veterans a means of
19 expression, connection, and empowerment. Our
20 partnership with Stella Adler Studio of Acting is a
21 cornerstone of this approach. Their outside-in
22 program provides veterans with actor and playwright
23 training alongside professional actors and others in
24 recovery. These weekly sessions foster creativity and
25 emotional growth, culminating in powerful

2 performances like those recently shared with
3 participants at our Ed Thompson Veterans Program. We
4 also collaborate with ANI, Arts Academies America,
5 where veterans engage in art therapy sessions focused
6 on pencil sketching and drawing. These meditative
7 activities provide a calming environment for self-
8 expression and resilience building. Each participant
9 leaves with a sense of pride and accomplishment.
10 Additionally, the Theater Development Fund's Veterans
11 Theater-Going Program has enriched our veterans'
12 lives by providing access to Broadway and off-
13 Broadway productions since 2018. These shared
14 cultural experiences offer moments of joy and
15 connection, reinforcing the importance of community
16 and recovery. These programs are more than creative
17 outlets. They are lifelines that help our veterans
18 process their experience, build confidence, and
19 envision brighter futures. They reflect our
20 commitment to a holistic approach to healing driven
21 by compassion and community. Thank you for
22 recognizing the importance of these efforts and for
23 supporting Samaritan Daytop Village. Together, we
24 continue to ensure that every veteran has the
25 opportunity to heal and thrive.

2 And I'd like to say, as a Navy veteran
3 and a person that has worked with veterans for the
4 last 19 years, art therapy works. When I first got
5 involved with Samaritan Daytop Village, there was an
6 art therapist on staff at our 43rd Street program. As
7 one of the first counselors at the Ed Thompson
8 Veterans Program, when they opened in 2006, we had an
9 art therapist on staff at the program. We know that
10 art therapy helps reduce the symptoms of PTSD. We
11 know that it helps people engage in talk therapy. The
12 arts are vital to veterans recovering so when
13 veterans get to Samaritan Daytop Village, they're in
14 crisis, right? Many, their mental health is unstable,
15 they have substance use disorder, criminal justice
16 involved, they have a plethora of problems. These
17 outlets, Stella Adler, Theater of War, I heard that
18 mentioned earlier today. I have seen folks engage in
19 these art therapy type of projects, and it begins to
20 open a whole new door for them. Plus also, they're
21 getting involved with a whole other community. I
22 really want the Committee to know that any funding
23 around the arts, that Samaritan Daytop Village will
24 use that funding wisely and has a history of working

2 with the arts as well as our evidence-based therapies
3 around cognitive behavioral therapy and the like.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I noticed you
5 exhibit the work around the buildings and the floors,
6 that's what I noticed first when I walked in there,
7 all the artwork on the walls and that's so important.
8 People don't realize how important showing either
9 student work or showing artist's work goes a long way
10 in the therapy part of it. Just doing the work, the
11 art, is one thing, but then when other people comment
12 and you get feedback, that actually builds self-
13 worth, builds a sense of pride, and a sense of
14 purpose so I love the way you exhibit art all
15 throughout the building. Thanks so much. Thank you
16 very much, Roger.

17 ROGER WALKER: Thank you for visiting our
18 facility.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

20 Timothy Pena, because he didn't come up,
21 Timothy? All right, I called you in the last panel.

22 All right, we're going to go, just have a
23 seat, and then George Singleton, Frederick Hart,
24 Michael Matos, Frederick Gasior, and Armando
25 Crescenzi.

2 Timothy, you could start.

3 TIMOTHY PENA: Good afternoon, my name is
4 Timothy Pena. I run an organization called Veterans
5 Justice Project. Glad to be here. I'd like to make a
6 couple of comments concerning what seems to be an
7 overwhelming issue of access to the veterans,
8 especially when it comes to programs such as what
9 you're proposing today, arts, and another program
10 that we're having with housing. It's time to lay this
11 on the table. I am a service-connected disabled
12 veteran with an honorable discharge. I am eligible
13 for all VA benefits, including HUD-VASH. There are
14 veterans in this community who are not eligible for
15 those benefits. There are veterans in this community
16 who have not an honorable discharge, but a bad
17 conduct discharge. There are veterans in this
18 community who have disgraced our service. Those
19 veterans, I'm having to share space with them. Those
20 veterans are sleeping at Borden Avenue. They're the
21 ones who are tearing sinks off the walls. They're the
22 ones who are dealing drugs. They're the ones who are
23 overdosing and dying, like we had another veteran who
24 died of overdose again last week. These veterans,
25 whether they are eligible for VA benefits or not, are

2 not my concern. My concern is when I'm transitioning,
3 and this is what we're talking about, into a place
4 like New York City, which is what I did two and a
5 half years ago, I was guaranteed by Congress a safe,
6 drug-free environment with supportive services,
7 wraparound supportive services, housing resources,
8 access to mental health, transportation, outreach
9 activities, and be able to have a community
10 engagement for the community that I was moving into.
11 I got a violent, drug-infested shelter because
12 Department of Homeless Services doesn't want to
13 separate the good guys from the bad guys. These
14 programs, these federally funded grant per diem
15 programs are meant for us. A lot of the City
16 programs, I understand that, are for anyone who
17 served. They should be able to have those services
18 provided them, but as a veteran in good standing with
19 Veterans Affairs, I should be afforded a little
20 higher and better service than what I'm receiving,
21 and all the other veterans over at Borden Avenue are
22 presently receiving. Thank you very much.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And, Timothy, you
24 brought it to the attention of the Borden Avenue
25 leadership, the director, and what was the response?

2 TIMOTHY PENA: So, I had a discussion with
3 a CEO of Borden Avenue, of Institute for Community
4 Living last week. You know, we saw this yesterday.
5 DHS is pointing the fingers at the vendors, saying
6 that they have no control, but in speaking to Jody
7 Rudin from ICL, they're pointing the finger at DHS.
8 Who do I believe? I think that DHS is bullying ICL,
9 they're bullying the City Council, and not allowing
10 us access to the veterans. They're bullying DVS. The
11 food's atrocious, and it's not the black trays.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I agree with
13 that, by the way, it should change.

14 TIMOTHY PENA: And I think that you're
15 under the impression that they're the black trays.
16 They're not. They're brought in after those black
17 trays have been, they've been, they're picked
18 through, and they're cold, because there's no kitchen
19 there. The kitchen's being used for a culinary
20 school, and they're cooking there but not sharing.
21 They're not cooking for the veterans. So, when foods
22 come in, and donations come in, they either go home
23 with staff, or they're...

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The culinary school,
25 you just mentioned that. I thought that was teaching

2 veterans on premise. They were actually teaching
3 them?

4 TIMOTHY PENA: Yeah, but they have, it's
5 not all just veterans. And then what they're doing is
6 the cooking part of that is actually over in
7 Manhattan so you have to be there. I've talked to
8 several veterans who, they only joined the culinary
9 Project Renewal just to eat but, once they were told
10 that they had to go over to Manhattan, and they have
11 to be there by six or seven, and it's a struggle
12 trying to get up at Borden, there's no coffee,
13 there's no food, there's nothing there.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So the food doesn't
15 get, in the kitchen, it doesn't get shared with the
16 residents at all?

17 TIMOTHY PENA: Zero. Okay. I have to talk
18 to you about that. Let's talk offline a little bit,
19 and I'll have to go over and look at that. Thank you.
20 Thank you, Timothy.

21 TIMOTHY PENA: Yeah, just to follow up
22 real quick, sir. So, Jamie Reardon did say something
23 that they're looking for another vendor, but these
24 GPD programs have cooks. We have a chef who cooks our
25 meals. She also talked about doing something with the

2 security over there, and doing something with the
3 laundry, the way that it's being set up. Okay, thank
4 you.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but I suggested
6 that over, I think it was two years ago now, to
7 change that over to... pre-pandemic, we had a working
8 kitchen then for everyone, and I'm distressed to see
9 that we're here, that the clients don't benefit. The
10 veterans don't benefit. I'm sorry, go ahead.

11 GEORGE SINGLETON: Good afternoon. My name
12 is George Singleton. I'm President of this small
13 organization called Disabled Veterans of New York. We
14 started last year. We have no funding, but we have
15 some issues that need to be addressed. The main issue
16 is our status in this state. If we're disabled
17 veterans, that means that we were issued a hawkers
18 license to sell goods and services because we were
19 physically hurt while we were in the military
20 service. But to come to this city, that's not what
21 you see. A disabled veteran go to the corner to get a
22 spot to feed his family, he has to fight with a guy
23 from another country that don't speak English. He has
24 to fight with the police. He has to fight with people
25 that have no license. I've been vending 23 years.

2 Should I still have to go through that after 23 years
3 of service? Come on. I've served honorably. I served
4 nine years of service, four years active, five years
5 reserve. I shouldn't have to come home to where I
6 live at and have to fight. I don't think no veteran
7 coming home should have to fight. So, the problem is
8 we need to have it crystal clear from the City
9 Council Resolution 686, I need you to take that up to
10 Albany and tell them, make it crystal clear to
11 anybody that reads that law from the Business Law 35-
12 A, disabled veterans have the highest poverty of any
13 veteran in the State of New York. Make it clear so
14 that there's no discrepancy when the police come to
15 you and say, oh, well, who got here first, who got
16 here second? We don't want to hear that shit. I'm
17 sorry, sorry. We don't want to hear that stuff. When
18 we put our hand up to serve this country, we didn't
19 ask, who was this, who was that? We just did it. We
20 did it to make sure that our family was safe and that
21 everybody else's family was safe. I think we deserve
22 the right to have that right with that respect.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Absolutely.

24 GEORGE SINGLETON: And the next thing, the
25 fact that when 9/11 happened, we were on the streets

2 out there and they took away our rights down at World
3 Trade Center and our rights on Heroes Canyon at
4 Broadway, because some veterans that came prior to me
5 said that was the only way that we were going to be
6 able to work in the city was to give up the avenues
7 and give up the rights to the Canyons, Hero and World
8 Trade Center, because people were upset because they
9 were selling pictures around Ground Zero. Right after
10 it happened, everybody was hot, come on. All the
11 smoke billowing, pictures was hanging around World
12 Trade Center. So, when it went up to Albany two years
13 later, I mean in 2004, when they made the law change,
14 that was the main focus. The focus was, oh, you're
15 selling stuff and you're hurting the people that live
16 at World Trade Center. That's over with now. You got
17 all these other vendors that don't even have a
18 license running around selling stuff illegal spots.
19 Why is it that only the police come to us? I'm just
20 here for answers because I'm tired of it.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. That's why we
22 have these bills and that's why we're hearing it
23 today. We're trying to address it. It's been probably
24 the most nagging problem that the disabled vendors
25 are getting pushed out, and that's since the City

2 Council opened up a lot more vending and we saw a
3 dramatic difference so it's up to this Council to fix
4 it. That's what we're trying to do. But thank you so
5 much for your testimony.

6 GEORGE SINGLETON: Thank you.

7 FREDERICK GASIOR: Sir, thank you. My
8 voice is usually loud enough, but anyhow, the
9 microphone, just make it louder. Anyhow, ladies and
10 gentlemen, City Council Members, distinguished
11 veterans, representatives and guests. My name is Fred
12 Gasior. I am a Vietnam combat veteran, President of
13 Vietnam Veterans of America in Manhattan Chapter 126,
14 also President of VVA 126 Foundation in New York
15 City. I have read the proposed legislative bills and
16 you have copies that are passed out, and I make
17 comments to each and every one of them and you can
18 read them at your particular leisure. I applaud the
19 actions taken by the City Council and the Committee
20 on Veterans Affairs. Great start and certainly a
21 small step that might pacify a few veterans in the
22 community, but not me. This is but a drop in the
23 bucket and a smokescreen by the City Council to cover
24 up lack of support for New York City veterans. The
25 actions and lack of support by the Administration of

2 this Council towards the veterans community, I
3 personally and many veterans, including some here at
4 this moment, believe to be disgraceful and
5 dishonorable. New York City residents, men and women,
6 have for decades answered a call for the country.
7 They signed up, they volunteered, some were drafted,
8 they served, they fought, some gave their last breath
9 of life. They received neither the country's glory
10 nor their country or city's compassion. The City of
11 New York has forsaken and abandoned the American
12 warriors, the veteran, those city residents who pay
13 taxes, the citizens of this great city and country
14 and has replaced them with the world migrants.

15 Two serious issues, two very serious
16 issues face veterans in this city. Issue number one
17 is veterans that are homeless, cannot find shelter,
18 food, clothing, but over 175,000 illegal migrants
19 plus, plus have been welcomed to the city, factual.
20 It has been said that the City is spending close to 2
21 billion dollars on shelter and housing, 2 billion
22 dollars on services, supplies, clothing, cell phone,
23 entertainment, visa cards, city ID cards, 500 million
24 on food and medical costs, 500 million just to
25 administer these things. As of today, December 18,

2 2024, the City of New York is approaching 5 billion
3 dollars in spending, and it comes out to about 388
4 dollars per migrant. Now, how do I wind this all
5 together? Well, now Chair Holden and Council Members,
6 I'd like you to tell me about all the money and all
7 the great and wonderful programs the City of New York
8 has put into effect to help veterans and all the
9 future money that you're planning to spend on
10 veterans programs for shelter, for food, for housing,
11 and the homeless, but I'd also like to have you tell
12 me is how much per day, per day, per veteran does the
13 City of New York spend? Do they spend 388 dollars a
14 day per veteran? Do they spend 300? Do they spend
15 100? Or is it more like 50 cents a day? I think that
16 probably is more appropriate. The City Council, I
17 believe, should be ashamed, but I think not because I
18 personally and many veterans believe that certain
19 City Council Members, not all, some are excluded, and
20 I exclude the ones in front of me, just don't give a
21 damn about veterans.

22 Issue number two, veterans that need
23 mental health treatment to heal the wounds, the
24 unseen wounds of war. Veterans' mental health and the
25 alleviation of veteran suicide is at an epidemic

2 proportion. Over 22 veterans per day, per day, kill
3 themselves across this country, and that's a fact and
4 can be verified, okay? Their pain, their mental
5 anguish has overcome the rationality of reason, but
6 actions can be taken to help stop and alleviate
7 veteran suicides. I ask this, what is the City doing
8 on mental health for veterans? How much are they
9 spending to support veterans' groups that reach out
10 and offer programs and treatment for their fellow
11 veterans? These veterans' groups and organizations
12 are the front line, are the safe haven for these
13 troubled veterans that need help. Why has the City
14 Council, whose members are of an educated society,
15 compassionate members of humanity, religious
16 subscribers, and tell me this, what have they done
17 and why haven't they done more? Veterans'
18 organizations in the city of New York, like United
19 War Veterans, Operation Warrior Shield, Vietnam
20 Veterans of America, Chapter 126, and their
21 foundation, and many, many more are the front line
22 for these troubled veterans. They provide the avenue
23 and source for proven therapies and treatments.
24 Veterans of all decades, race, color, creeds,
25 religions, genders, they're welcome. These frontline

2 organizations need funding. They need help from the
3 city. As our esteemed Mayor has said many times, show
4 me the money. Yes, Mr. Mayor, the veterans' community
5 would like to see the money. Mr. Mayor, where is the
6 money?

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much for
8 the testimony. That's amazing. I can't disagree with
9 anything you said. We have to move on. We just ran
10 way over time on that one.

11 FREDERICK GASIOR: Very good. Chair, you
12 can read the rest of what I have to say.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I think I have
14 your testimony. If you could give us a copy.

15 FREDERICK GASIOR: I've distributed
16 copies. I thank you very much. I appreciate what the
17 Council is doing.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much for
19 telling the truth. Thank you.

20 FREDERICK GASIOR: Thank you.

21 FREDERICK HART: My name is Mr. Hart. Mr.
22 George at the end kind of spoke for me already. I'm
23 here just to let you know that I'm just tired of
24 being stressed out when I leave Midtown to go home.
25 Sometimes I see myself lash out at society because I

2 feel like I'm being disrespected. I just got my blue
3 license and I decided to go into Times Square to try
4 to make a better living, right, and for some reason,
5 it seems like I'm at war with every food cart vendor.
6 Everybody is disrespecting me, right? So, I'm trying
7 to find out where do I stand? What are my rights,
8 right? Do they come before the veterans or do the
9 veterans come after them? Who's first? Who's second?
10 Who's third? These people, they have to make a living
11 too, but they have no respect for us, and the reason
12 why is because the police do not help. My first day
13 on the job, I spoke at 250 Broadway when I first met
14 you, Mr. Holden. That lady, Ms. Vickie, was here. I
15 told her I was ashamed to put the license on my neck
16 so I started hiding it. She said, you should never
17 hide your license. They surrounded me and they gave
18 me a ticket. My first day on the job. And they said,
19 oh, your table's too high. They gave me a ticket. And
20 I wanted to know why. And I said, there's people all
21 around selling with no license. They walked away and
22 I followed them for four blocks. It hurt.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And you told the
24 police that you were a veteran?

2 FREDERICK HART: They seen my license.
3 They took my license and wrote a ticket. My first day
4 on the job. And I felt violated. Here, I go, well,
5 what did I do? I said, my father was a cop. My
6 stepfather, I respect the law. Why would you ticket
7 me? Now that I see that they have no respect for us,
8 right? I want to know from the Council, where do we
9 stand?

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, we're bringing
11 it up with the Commissioner, the new Police
12 Commissioner, about the harassment of our veterans so
13 that's going to be, that's the number one topic from
14 this Committee on meeting with the Police
15 Commissioner so if you can tell me any more
16 information about that, if they're continuing, we
17 have to change that.

18 FREDERICK HART: And another thing, I want
19 to know who's first. Does...

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You're first.

21 FREDERICK HART: Well, you got to tell the
22 food card (INAUDIBLE) down there who's first.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, you guys are
24 first, period.

2 FREDERICK HART: That's all I want to
3 know.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, thank you.

5 MICHAEL MATOS: Good afternoon, Council
6 Members. My name is Michael Matos. I'm a veteran of
7 the United States Coast Guard and now serve as the
8 First Vice Commander of American Legion Post 917. We
9 are the first post to be chartered in New York City
10 in over 10 years, which I believe comes with a
11 special responsibility. Our mission is to build a
12 multi-generational community of veterans here in the
13 city with a focus on meeting the needs of the post
14 9/11 generation and beyond, which is why I'm here
15 today to testify and raise a growing concern that our
16 members have brought to my attention. A proposal has
17 been presented by role players of the incoming
18 presidential administration to cut government
19 spending that they feel is unnecessary, including
20 funding for VA benefits. I'm sure we can all agree
21 that this will not only be a disrespectful decision,
22 but also a threat to our national security. President
23 George Washington once said, the willingness with
24 which our young people are likely to serve in any
25 war, no matter how justified, shall be directly

2 proportional to how they perceive veterans of earlier
3 wars were treated and appreciated by our nation. With
4 ongoing concerns surrounding military recruitment,
5 how can we expect a conversation to go between a
6 potential service member and a veteran who has had
7 their benefits revoked for the sake of government
8 efficiency? Conflicts of foreign powers who seek to
9 do us harm are already on the rise. Are we willing to
10 leave ourselves vulnerable by not responsibly
11 handling the true cost of war? I look forward to the
12 Council's support to ensure any proposals to cut VA
13 benefits as a whole are immediately struck down.

14 I'd also like to recognize and express my
15 appreciation for my fellow veteran service
16 organizations that are here today, including the NYC
17 Department of Veteran Services and Exit 12 Dance
18 Company, who can speak much more in depth on the
19 positive impact arts and culture can have on our
20 veteran community than I can. Thank you for your
21 time.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for your
23 testimony. Excellent. Thank you.

24 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: Good afternoon to the
25 Committee and to all the veteran advocates who are

2 here today. My name is Armando Crescenzi. I was a
3 little confused coming in what the agenda was going
4 to be today so I put my focus on the Introductions
5 and the Resolutions. However, having sat here and
6 heard of how meaningful and helpful the arts are to
7 veterans in the city, I have to say that street
8 vending is likewise very helpful to veterans in the
9 city. You asked earlier if somebody had a success
10 story, success stories about how arts were able to
11 help a veteran overcome a crisis or maybe a suicide.
12 I have hundreds of stories, not hundreds, but
13 certainly dozens of stories where street vending was
14 basically the bridge, the foundation, that helped
15 veterans in crisis make it through another day and
16 turn their lives around, and the fact that, I hate to
17 say it, but the discrepancies between the willingness
18 to embrace the arts, but street vending not so much,
19 it really left me with a bad impression of the
20 Council, and I feel that basically the Council owes
21 all the vendors in this room an apology because I
22 have kids and I'm not going to invite kids to the
23 party and make one feel special and the other one
24 feel like crap so I think the Council owes an apology
25 to all the vendors in this room.

2 So, I'd like to go on and speak a little
3 bit more about how beneficial street vending can
4 really be. Basically, just like the Doe Fund says,
5 work works, certainly for immediate finance, self-
6 efficacy, job training, job development, career
7 development, a bridge, a reintegration. Veterans,
8 it's rough out there. People who do this for a long
9 time, it's really just a mechanism for the veteran to
10 get on his feet and hopefully come up with a plan,
11 build a restaurant, go back to school, something
12 else. For those of us who stay, they get good at it.
13 There are fortunes to be made out there. Sadly,
14 veterans have not been given the opportunity they
15 were promised and it's just not easy for vets to do
16 this. I would say any vet who finished basic training
17 should be a success out there, but because of the
18 City's harassment and disrespect, they're driven out
19 of the marketplace.

20 So having said that, I'd like to go to
21 what I was going to do and comment on the Resolutions
22 and the Intros. Regarding Resolution Number 465 on
23 public housing, I'm fine with everything except for
24 the Resolution. The Resolution only says that the
25 veteran shall be given preference for public housing.

2 That needs to be broadened. Public housing, all new
3 developments, any development where the builders have
4 been given a tax credit or a tax break, it needs to
5 be expanded. Also, with the City of Yes having been
6 approved, there's a lot of opportunity there for the
7 City. They're going to separate 5 billion dollars to
8 promote the City of Yes. Well, how about a program
9 where if a homeowner rents a unit to a veteran, their
10 loan could be forgiven. The loan for the cost of
11 building their dwelling unit could be forgiven over,
12 let's say, five years so I thought that was a pretty
13 good idea. And of course, Mitchell-Lama and any other
14 housing that the City has access to.

15 All right, regarding the real estate tax
16 break. Also, I'm in support of that, but the
17 Resolution is vague because we already have a
18 property tax exemption for veterans, 15 percent, 20
19 percent. We already have that. What we're looking for
20 is an exemption for the entire annual tax. So that
21 Resolution has to be cleaned up a little bit.

22 Moving right along to the original. Oh,
23 I'll start with the silly one first, or next, and
24 that is the Commissioner shall waive the fee for
25 commissary operators who reserve a space for one

2 mobile food vet. Who wrote that? I don't know any
3 veterans who own commissaries, all right? That was
4 not written by a veteran. It was not written for a
5 veteran's interest, and there's no way to make sure
6 that benefit will trickle down to a veteran. In fact,
7 having been out there for 20 years, I have to say
8 that the commissaries are a very hostile place for a
9 veteran, and the idea that one veteran by himself is
10 going to be in a very competitive and aggressive and
11 sometimes violent environment by himself in a
12 commissary. I mean, I've been a victim. I remember
13 when the hot dog carts, Nathan's came out. They were
14 all electric carts. Can't tell you how many times I
15 went to get my cart. It had been unplugged overnight,
16 all right? And you go to complain, next thing you
17 know, your gas cords are cut. So, I just want to wrap
18 this up because the next item is very important.

19 And the thing is, I would like to have a
20 little more time because we spent about an hour and
21 40 minutes on the arts, and I think that we just..

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's the topic of
23 this hearing, so.

24 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: All right, well, what...

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: This is not a food
3 vendor...

4 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: The resolution, well,
5 I don't know. I was invited to discuss the
6 Resolution.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, again, you can
8 talk about the Resolution, but not the other topic
9 and say, we're not giving enough time for this topic.
10 We are. I've given you more than a lot of time.

11 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: That's very
12 disingenuous.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Then that's
14 your opinion, but if you want to change the word
15 commissaries...

16 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: I need one more
17 minute.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Let me just get back
19 to your original. You just mentioned about 687, the
20 word commissaries. What would you change it to? You
21 don't like that word?

22 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: No.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, what would you
24 change it to?

25

2 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: When you start giving
3 commissaries to service-disabled vets...

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I just asked you a
5 question.

6 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: It has to be thrown
7 out.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Change the...

9 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: You're rewarding our
10 abusers by giving the commissary owner a break.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What would you like
12 to see?

13 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: What am I trying to
14 say? Build commissaries for veterans.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Thank you.
16 Thank you for your...

17 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: One last thing on the
18 appointments to the Street Vendor Advisory Board. The
19 title of those people who are picked is absolutely
20 inconsequential. It could be the Pope. It could be
21 Derek Jeter. If they don't have training, if they
22 don't have awareness of what is going on in the
23 street, if they're not aware of what's going on, it
24 doesn't matter if they're commissioners of this or
25 commissioners of that. They are not going to help

2 write any legislation that's going to help any street
3 vendors so my suggestion would be, to add to that
4 amendment, during the member's tenure on the Street
5 Vendors Advisory Board, each member must spend at
6 least one day a month on a field day working with a
7 vendor and it should cover all the vendors. A general
8 vendor who's a vet, or a general vendor who's not a
9 vet. It should cover food vendors who are vets and
10 food vendors who are not vets. It should cover those
11 vets who are specialized vending licensees and those
12 vets who are not specialized licensees. And it should
13 also include First Amendment matter vendors. Because
14 what has happened, why we have made no progress over
15 20 years is because folks who are preparing
16 legislation or hearing our complaints, just don't
17 understand our issues so there needs to be a certain
18 level of proficiency on the board and I have so much
19 more to say, but I'm sorry if I encroached on your
20 time.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you
22 for your testimony. Thank the whole panel for great
23 testimony. Thanks so much.

24 Next panel, Gene DeFrancis, Walter Wells,
25 Sharon Brown Jeter, and R. Paul DeLue (phonetic), R.

2 Paul DeLue. We can't read the last name so well, so
3 we're guessing. What's the first name? First name is,
4 we can't read your first. We can only read Paul, I
5 guess. Your handwriting's like a doctor. You want,
6 could you, Sergeant, can you see if the individual is
7 this person?

8 All right, Gene.

9 GENE DEFRANCIS: Good afternoon, Chair.
10 Begin?

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

12 GENE DEFRANCIS: I want to thank you for
13 your patience in this Committee. I know your
14 intentions are extremely positive and well-meaning
15 based on our discussions through the past months. The
16 veteran community is just extremely frustrated. You
17 speak of the migrants and the money that was spent in
18 the hotels, and then you speak of the crises at
19 Borden houses. I want to just, because there are so
20 many topics to go into, but I just want to ultimately
21 speak on the root of the problem, and that's the
22 veteran culture. You wouldn't have an Asian American
23 speaking on Latino issues, you wouldn't..

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: One second, just
25 pause.

2 GENE DEFRANCIS: Sure.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You could stop the
4 clock, or start all over.

5 GENE DEFRANCIS: Just forget about the
6 clock. It's very important, so I want to start again.

7 The veteran culture is extremely unique.
8 No matter what culture or what background we come
9 from, once we swear that oath, and once we graduate
10 boot camp, we become a fraternity, a siblinghood of
11 like-minded people, whether we're from Alaska,
12 Florida, Hawaii, or New York, and continually,
13 everywhere our members look, there are non-veterans
14 speaking for us, not listening to us, unlike this
15 Committee, which we do appreciate, but they're either
16 totally ignoring our needs and our requests or
17 they're wanting to give us the sun and the moon, and
18 we're a specifically unique culture where we weren't
19 given the flight mechanism. When it came down to
20 fight or flight, and I'm specifically referring to
21 our veteran vendors, and those in the shelters that
22 are extremely frustrated, they are encountered by the
23 police officers getting into trouble because they
24 don't run away. And when we can have that dialogue of
25 how to communicate with the veterans and the veteran

2 community at large and for Borden Housing to allowing
3 the VSOs in their facilities, or any VA hospital that
4 doesn't allow a VSO, there's a stark difference
5 between the Bronx VA that does allow the VSOs and
6 works very well with those that speak the veteran
7 language and then we can move some of these programs
8 forward. Also, in the Bronx, we have the HHC Housing
9 coming through where those, either pretrial,
10 detainees, are getting housing and resources before
11 the veterans as well.

12 I'm happy to answer any questions
13 regarding the American Legion facility being not
14 operated and how to access, because there is a
15 structure, as far as the county can then rebuild,
16 because there's a much larger and in-depth situation
17 going on with why these VSOs, especially some posts,
18 are not recruiting, but it's too much to go into
19 detail here and I want to share that as far as
20 culture, and sticking with that theme, when you tell
21 a veteran to focus on a specific task, if you tell
22 them to focus on PTSD and veteran suicide, they're
23 going to drill that day in and day out. Whereas the
24 reason why all these programs are, and art is
25 chaotic, I'm an artist by trade. I am a SAG-AFTRA

2 member. I made a career in the performing arts
3 successfully, and art is chaotic. Art is not calming
4 every single day and night. It can be, but when you
5 challenge yourself, and especially if you're on
6 stage, those moments before, but the veterans thrive
7 in it because it's a task and it's a mission. And if
8 you have them focus on that task, if you have them
9 focus on the horse, if you have them focus on any
10 kind of therapy, they'll thrive.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it can be
12 intense. Sure, there's all different emotions, but
13 there's a result where there's a satisfaction.

14 GENE DEFRANCIS: There's an
15 accomplishment.

16 GENE DEFRANCIS: After the fact, that's
17 undeniable, correct.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, thank you.
19 Thanks so much for your testimony.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We have Raymond, go
21 ahead.

22 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: My name is Raymond
23 Ponce de Leon. I'm a veteran. I was in Vietnam. I
24 served for over 37 years, I'm a Sergeant Major. And I
25 think what's going on with the veterans here, they

2 don't care. The public don't care, the Police
3 Department don't care. You get a ticket, you can get
4 arrested.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you're a veteran?

6 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Excuse me?

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You're a vendor?

8 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: I'm a vendor and
9 I'm a food vendor.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

11 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: To get my license
12 for a food vendor, I'm going through a lot of changes
13 now. I have to go to get it inspected, re-inspected,
14 then you got to wait. As a general vendor with a
15 disabled veteran, I got stopped three or four times
16 with a ticket.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All three, you got
18 three or four tickets?

19 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: No, in different
20 time periods I got a ticket. I was in Manhattan, I
21 got a ticket because I don't have the blue one, I
22 have the other one.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Where are you now,
24 what location?

25

2 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Right now, I'm not
3 doing anything. I'm an artist by trade.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are you waiting for
5 your papers to come in?

6 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: No, I have all my
7 papers, but the only one I don't have is the one for
8 food cart because I cook. And they give you a hard
9 time. They tell you, okay, you have to have it re-
10 inspected, you only have 30 days to do it. It takes
11 money to get a food cart out, a lot of money. My food
12 cart is over 10,000 dollars. Every time if I go to
13 inspections, it'll cost me five and a half.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you're not using
15 it now?

16 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: I can't use it by
17 law because you get a ticket. You don't have that
18 sticker, you get a ticket. Then you have all these
19 foreigners out here doing it. In my neighborhood in
20 East New York, none of the veterans know about the
21 arts here that you mentioned today. None of them know
22 because they come to me because I'm part of the
23 church, I'm a deacon, so none of them know about
24 that. The community service don't know about that.
25 They're not saying anything about that. All the

2 veterans are trying to survive and do something, and
3 you can't. Now, you all said that you'll give out
4 information, grants and all that. How come East New
5 York doesn't have that right now? How come Bed-Stuy
6 doesn't have that right now? Every other neighborhood
7 will have it. We don't have it. That bothers me as a
8 Sergeant Major because I told all my men this, you
9 got a job to do, you do it. You come out, you go to
10 the VA. You have any problems, you go to the VA. You
11 don't go outside like they're doing now. They're
12 sending you out to another doctor (INAUDIBLE). But
13 the arts, I've been doing arts for 25 years, and that
14 one, I heard something about this gentleman said and
15 that gentleman said that art is the thing. I love
16 art. I enjoy it. So how come you can't help me? Why I
17 don't have the resources? I design, I make leather
18 bags, pocketbooks. I paint, draw. I do woodwork. I
19 create things that are..

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You said you sell
21 food though. You sell this too?

22 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: I can't sell food
23 right now.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you're selling
25 this on the street?

2 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: I'm selling that
3 on the street.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

5 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Even my artwork,
6 my leather bags, my belts, handmade, and I get
7 stopped by the police.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you don't have,
9 do you have the license to sell? Is that...

10 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Yes, you want to
11 see it?

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No. I believe you.

13 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: It's in my pocket.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I believe you.

15 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: But the whole
16 point is (INAUDIBLE) go too much time. I'm an artist
17 by, for the day I was born. I went to school for it.
18 How come I didn't know about these programs that he's
19 saying here in front of this board? Why I didn't know
20 about it?

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, part of the
22 problem, and I'll tell you that and then we got to
23 move on. But part of the problem is that the DVS
24 budget for the agency, they can't communicate really.
25 They can't do a mailing to you. It's because their

2 budget is so small so that's what we're trying to
3 correct, and the Mayor's Office has heard our pleas
4 and hopefully the Council will hear it.

5 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Yeah, I know the
6 Mayor.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So what we want is
8 for, and I said it today, it could be double or
9 quadruple or even more. They should have a 20-
10 million-dollar budget, not a 5 million. Smallest
11 agency, not by, not from being a coincidence. Now I
12 just have to move on, but we can talk after. We could
13 talk after.

14 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: We need to, the
15 communities need to find out about this.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

17 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: East New York,
18 Bed-Stuy needs to know about it.

19 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: You can call, and
20 the Commissioner is sitting right behind you, he's
21 the only Commissioner that stays, and I'm sure his
22 staff will talk to you after.

23 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: One other thing,
24 these foreigners coming up here, they harass you.
25 They leave their food carts, Euclid Avenue, they

2 leave their food carts overnight. The rules told me,
3 right here, downtown Manhattan told me that I have to
4 take my food cart when it's licensed and park it in
5 certain areas.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, we're hearing
7 this over and over again. What I need is specific
8 locations that this is happening, that they're
9 leaving these food carts.

10 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Oh, I can...

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, no, that's why
12 we're going to talk. That's why we'll have to get.

13 RAYMOND PONCE DE LEON: Euclid Avenue is a
14 train station. There's two food carts there are
15 locked in.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, we'll talk
17 offline, all right. Thank you.

18 Go ahead.

19 WALTER WELLS: Thank you for letting me be
20 able to speak. My name is Walter Wells. I'm a
21 disabled Vietnam vet. I appreciate what George said,
22 Armando, we all been through a lot of trials and
23 tribulations with our vending. Right now, I'm going
24 through a problem where the agency, the Health
25 Department, they made a mistake with my permit. So

2 they try to tell me, oh, I let it expire and stuff
3 like that, but they made the mistake by trying to
4 give me a park permit. So now I don't have no permit,
5 and I can't, for the last three years now, no
6 Christmas for my family, because I'm not able to do
7 that, do my food, and plus, my cart is missing. You
8 know, why? Because we have a group out there call
9 themselves the Egyptian Mafia. You know, they have
10 carts on our corners, the veterans' corners. You
11 know, two and three carts. But yet and still, the
12 veterans are only restricted to one cart. We don't
13 mind us being restricted to one cart, but how could
14 they have three or four carts taking up the space,
15 the rules and regulations? I lost so many friends
16 already, you know, because of what's going on, us
17 getting tickets from Sanitation. These guys refusing
18 to move their carts. They leave there 24 hours. The
19 rules say they're not supposed to be out there 24
20 hours without going back to the common server to get
21 clean, but they want to clean the carts there. If you
22 ever walk down to Times Square, most of the dirty
23 water and oil and stuff like that is put in the
24 sewers. That's illegal, and they're not supposed to
25 do that. They're not supposed to have meat hanging

2 out all day, and they're going to serve it to people
3 that come to visit New York. It's disgusting. But yet
4 and still, the veterans are kicked out. We don't have
5 no corners, you understand? And the few of us that do
6 have corners, you know, the guys, they really don't
7 want to fight, but they will go get their group, or
8 they will cause smoke coming from the carts that'll
9 mess up your merchandise, you know? I mean, we're
10 going through a lot over there, you know? And that
11 thing that you heard about Borden Avenue earlier, I
12 feel real bad about it because I'm a product of
13 Borden Avenue. Back then, we didn't have all those
14 drugs and stuff like that. We started a drug program
15 there, a prayer group there, and I got my license
16 that helped me change my life, my vendor's license,
17 because I was one of the first 60 guys to get the
18 blue license, one of the first, and that helped me
19 get my apartment there, and I'm still in the same
20 apartment from all that time.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, Mr. Walter, just
22 let me, because your time's up, but I want to ask
23 you, you mentioned that the Department of Sanitation
24 is giving you tickets.

25 WALTER WELLS: Yeah.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are the police doing
3 it?

4 WALTER WELLS: I don't blame...

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, no, just a
6 question. Are the police?

7 WALTER WELLS: No, no. The police...

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

9 WALTER WELLS: Yeah, some of the police,
10 because I did get a ticket from a (INAUDIBLE), but
11 she won't do that again because I think they've
12 straightened her about that.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, because I can't
14 see, if you're wearing the hat, you know...

15 WALTER WELLS: They do not care.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You have the ID, you
17 have the blue.

18 WALTER WELLS: They do not care. I wear
19 this around my neck all day, but they don't care.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right.

21 WALTER WELLS: You know?

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, I'm going to
23 address that with the Police Commissioner.

24 WALTER WELLS: Yeah, I wish you could
25 address them about it.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I'll talk to the
3 Sanitation.

4 WALTER WELLS: Yeah, but the Health
5 Department also, they're not helping me get my
6 permit. They're the ones that are holding it, and I
7 feel that they got enough people, they're friends and
8 taking care of their own people, you understand...

9 (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE)

11 WALTER WELLS: only Egyptian people. We're
12 not getting nothing.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. All right,
14 Walter, we're trying to address that with some
15 legislation, but we'll certainly address some of
16 these harassment things, the ticketing and just the
17 illegal vendors that you mentioned pushing off
18 veterans. That should not be.

19 WALTER WELLS: Yeah, but I'm not blaming
20 them, I'm blaming the agency.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

22 WALTER WELLS: Because by them allowing
23 these guys to be out there 24 hours, all those carts
24 are taking over. That's not right.

25

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I agree, I
3 agree. We have to move on. Thank you.

4 SHARON BROWN JETER: Hello, my name is
5 Sharon Brown-Jeter, and I always want to remember
6 Israel, defend Israel, and we know the veterans have
7 defended Israel over all the years that we have been
8 a nation. That is one of our responsibilities. The
9 Bible says, those who bless Israel, God will bless
10 them, and I thank all of the service members for what
11 they have done for us, and we are going to give them
12 what they need. So, they need housing and that can be
13 immediate. As I have said before, there are empty
14 apartments, houses, and whatever there are that are
15 long-term. They can get into these apartments.
16 There's a thing that they are doing, trying to
17 separate veterans from their property. So many of
18 these veterans that are homeless and things like
19 that, it's a situation where you don't own property.
20 That's a hint to slavery, you can't own property. So,
21 they have veterans moving around, losing jobs, not
22 being able to pay rent. They have to go from place to
23 place. They won't be able to maintain property and
24 things like that. We're not going to do that to our
25 veterans. There are many stores that are going to be

2 changing hands. We have halal stores and things like
3 that. People who represent other nations, like Islam,
4 they are no longer going to be getting these
5 businesses. We're going to be giving it to our
6 veterans. Our veterans can own whatever they want to
7 in the street and have stands, but they have a right
8 to also have stores, just like everyone else. Many of
9 these stores, they send their money to Islamic
10 countries. We are currently at war with Islamic
11 countries. We're going to find out the mosque that
12 help out people to harm our veterans, that harass
13 them here. Many of the problems that the veterans are
14 having, whether it be through the health system or
15 whatever system attacks and harasses them, they're
16 doing it on behalf of Islam and whatever attacks
17 America. We're going to go after those things and
18 we're going to get the veterans every single thing
19 they deserve, every benefit they've missed. If they
20 were homeless veterans out on the street, they will
21 be considered to have been active duty. When they
22 were out on the street, if they were out on the
23 street for 10 years, congratulations, you were active
24 duty for 10 years as well as whatever years you spent
25 in the military so I'm working on all of this stuff.

2 And when I was a little girl, I said I was going to
3 find out why the veterans were homeless when I was a
4 little girl, and as I looked through it, I found the
5 connection between Islam and anti-Semitism, and
6 that's what we're dealing with now in Israel so just
7 remember the hostages and we want Yahweh's people to
8 be free. There are some people from New York that was
9 killed as a hostage and we are defending America, and
10 thank you veterans for taking care of America. We're
11 going to take care of you.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sharon.
13 Thank you to the panel for this testimony.

14 We're moving on to the Zoom portion of
15 our testimony on Zoom. On Zoom, Lenny Williams.

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

17 LEONARD WILLIAMS: Hello, can you hear me?

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We can hear you.

19 LEONARD WILLIAMS: Okay, good afternoon,
20 everybody, and thanks for letting me share. I
21 appreciate 126 talking about, hang on, talking about
22 the homeless veterans and also Timothy talking about
23 Borden Avenue. I want to talk about Borden Avenue and
24 the homeless, the homeless veterans, homeless
25 population. I'll start with, my name is Lenny

2 Williams. I'm the current President of Vietnam
3 Veterans of America, Chapter 32 out of Maspeth.
4 Councilman Holden, I'm in your District and we work
5 together very well, and I thank you for all you do.

6 All right, so anyway, I'm going to start
7 off on, Borden Avenue is located in Long Island City,
8 New York is a veterans residence/shelter. From what I
9 know, Borden Avenue Veterans Residence Shelter is
10 part of Independent Community Living, the ICL,
11 traditional services of the City of New York, which I
12 believe consists of eight shelters, six to eight
13 shelters for homeless, but Borden Avenue was the only
14 veterans shelter out of that eight shelters. Why
15 veterans are part of the New York City homeless, I
16 could somewhat understand that, but I believe there
17 should be a special part like what do you call it,
18 room for people that would represent veterans as a
19 whole, you know, homeless veterans. And we talked
20 about homeless veterans a lot today. What happened
21 was, I'll talk about Borden Avenue, as that gentleman
22 said, I think his name was Timothy, mentioned about
23 the kitchen and so on and so forth. Me personally, I
24 have a personal experience with Borden Avenue and on
25 Thanksgiving day of November 28th, myself, the

2 charitable organization, Brothers Helping
3 Incorporated, where they brought 210 ready-to-eat
4 meals to Borden Avenue at 11 o'clock. They've done it
5 three or four times prior to that in the last couple
6 of years, and they always had access to the shelter.
7 This time around, his name is Andy Yolanas
8 (phonetic). He was scheduled, he made arrangements a
9 couple of weeks before Borden Avenue, and they gave
10 him the okay to show up on Thanksgiving day. I'll say
11 Thanksgiving day, which was on Thursday that day at
12 11 o'clock. I met Andy prior to that at another
13 function, and he invited me to help him out to
14 distribute the food. (COUGH) Excuse me. And so I met
15 him there at 11. I says, okay, I met him there at 11
16 o'clock, and he was standing outside in the rain. It
17 was an ugly morning. I said, if people could remember
18 that, and I said what's going on (TIMER CHIME) and he
19 said we were denied access.

20 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Thank you, your time
21 has expired.

22 LEONARD WILLIAMS: I turned around and I
23 said, you know, why, so I went in there, and they
24 just refused access to Borden Avenue. They said, if
25 you want to drop off these 210 meals in a little

2 vestibule off to the side of Borden Avenue, and just
3 leave it there or take it with you. Of course, we
4 don't have a choice. This is Thanksgiving day. They
5 wanted to provide for the veterans so I helped them
6 bring the meals into this little room off to the side
7 at 11 o'clock in the morning, and God only knows what
8 happened to them. I immediately called Councilman
9 Holden's office, and I also called Jason Loughran,
10 who's the Senior Intergovernmental Spokesperson for
11 the veterans. Both Councilman Holden and also James
12 Loughran says, listen, we'll make a couple of phone
13 calls. It was too late. It was Thanksgiving day.
14 These veterans, they didn't get the meals that... maybe
15 later on, it had to be cold. Anyway, later on that
16 day, I'm sitting at home, and I'm looking at the TV,
17 and I see Mayor Adams serving all these homeless
18 people Thanksgiving meals, and I said, Jesus, this is
19 ridiculous. Like we're veterans in Borden Avenue,
20 United States veterans. Like we said, we've served
21 our country. We did our time. And here, we can't even
22 get in there to deliver meals.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, Lenny, could
24 you wrap it up? Yeah, just wrap it up, because we're
25 way over time.

2 LEONARD WILLIAMS: Everybody else had 10
3 minutes.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, no, no, no, no.

5 LEONARD WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah, okay. But
6 Borden, okay, so let me just say, okay, I'm just
7 saying, that's amazing. Anyway, the homeless people,
8 something has to be done with Borden Avenue. You
9 heard this from Timothy and from other people. It's
10 where, so we have to be respected and categorized in
11 a special way. Again, with the vendors, the food
12 vendors, these people are talking about the street
13 vendors. You know, why not? What all these marijuana
14 stores are going up, illegal marijuana stores. If
15 they talk about veterans, all the veterans get there.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Lenny, Lenny, we have
17 to move on, but thank you for all the work you do
18 with the homeless vets, Vietnam Vets Chapter 32,
19 doing so much work. You're doing the coat drive now,
20 and gloves, and so forth.

21 LEONARD WILLIAMS: We're trying to.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, you'll get
23 there. Thank you. You dropped off coats today at my
24 office, and I want to thank you again, Lenny.

25 We're going to move on. Thanks, Len.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No problem, no
3 problem. I'll talk to you soon.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You have to work on
5 the lighting there.

6 LEONARD WILLIAMS: I'm sorry. All of a
7 sudden it got dark.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, okay.

9 LEONARD WILLIAMS: I know, I know, it got
10 dark.

11 Okay, next person on Zoom is Rabah
12 Belkebir.

13 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

14 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Rabah, we can hear
16 you.

17 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE) can you hear
18 me?

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Rabah, your
20 connection seems to be compromised.

21 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE)

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, we can hardly
23 hear you. You're breaking up.

24 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE)

25

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We're going to circle
3 back to you, Rabah, maybe... no, we're not hearing you
4 well. It's breaking up. I guess it's the connection
5 if you could, yeah, okay, try it again.

6 No, we don't hear you. We're going to
7 move on.

8 Our next panelist, Christopher Leon
9 Johnson.

10 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

11 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Hello? Can you
12 hear me?

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We got you.

14 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Hey, what's up,
15 man? My name is Christopher Leon Johnson, On The
16 Record. I'm here to testify in support of Intro. 686
17 and Intro. 687. I support my veterans, but the issue
18 is that, I know this bill is going to go through, but
19 the issue is that we need to make sure that a certain
20 non-profit that's been called out in 2023 for the FY-
21 24 budget hearing, which is called the Street Vendor
22 Project, which is under Urban Justice Center that
23 gets a lot of government funding does not be involved
24 with this conversation, and the reason they shouldn't
25 be involved is because of the fact that the Street

2 Vendor Project, they don't advocate for veterans.
3 They don't advocate for street vendors. They act like
4 they advocate the street vendor, but they don't. All
5 they do is they put street vendors in more danger
6 than people think that (INAUDIBLE) don't say they do.
7 They put the street vendors in danger because what
8 they do is they protect criminals. They protect the
9 same people that the veterans was complaining about,
10 like the people that have like three or four carts
11 that are parked out 24 hours without washing
12 themselves, don't take a shower, have dirty water,
13 they got dirty water and stuff like that. That's the
14 reason why we need to make sure that the Street
15 Vendor Project does not get involved in this
16 conversation. There's a lot of corruption that
17 happens in the street vendor industry. There's a few
18 people that could talk to you about that, like Raul
19 Rivera, you should ask him about that because he's
20 been out there fighting for this industry, fighting
21 for the veterans. He's busy today. You should ask
22 him, Bob, about the street vendors, what they go
23 through, but there's a lot of corruption that goes on
24 and it's a big issue that they got corrupt non-
25 profits and Street Vendor Project that protects these

2 people. At the same time, you have like elected
3 officials like Jenifer Rajkumar who's a State
4 Assembly Member that is known for taking money from
5 certain people that protects those same vendors that
6 be at Times Square having about three, four carts,
7 being protected by the police, don't get stopped by
8 the police while the veterans that has integrity and
9 don't do pay to play or pay people off to stay in
10 business, they get harassed so there's a lot of
11 corruption that goes on in this industry. The
12 veterans go through a lot of dirty shenanigans and I
13 feel bad for them. I know that the City Council is
14 really, really weak to fix this issue with the
15 veterans because majority of the City Council,
16 excluding the Commonsense Caucus, Oswald Feliz and
17 Shaun Abreu, they don't care about the veterans at
18 all. They only care about pleasing these non-profits
19 like Street Vendor Project and appeasing corrupt
20 elected officials like Sandy Nurse, Shahana Hanif,
21 and the Progressive Caucus so people got to start
22 calling out the crap that's happening in the city
23 with the veterans. I thank you, Bob Holden, for
24 having this hearing. I know that you and the Members
25 of the Commonsense Caucus are small compared to...

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Thank you. Your time is
3 expired.

4 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Council, and,
5 you know, I hope that this bill go through, but we
6 need to support our veterans instead of supporting
7 these criminals, the non-profits that the Progressive
8 Caucus listen to. So, thank you so much (INAUDIBLE) I
9 have to go to an event so take care, guys.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Chris.
11 Thank you so much.

12 All right. We're going to circle back to
13 Rabah.

14 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

15 RABAH BELKEBIR: Rabah, can you hear us?
16 You can talk. Rabah.

17 All right, he's having connection
18 problem. Oh, here we go. Yeah, go ahead. We can hear
19 some of it.

20 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE)

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Rabah, it doesn't
22 look like it's working. If you could send us...

23 RABAH BELKEBIR: I hope everybody's doing
24 good. I (INAUDIBLE)

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, it's not going to
3 work. Rabah, you could send us the testimony.

4 RABAH BELKEBIR: That's fine, Mr.
5 Chairman. That's what...

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We hear.

7 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE)

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Rabah, we're hearing
9 two words.

10 RABAH BELKEBIR: I will. Thank you, Mr.
11 Chairman.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Thank you.
13 Thank you so much.

14 RABAH BELKEBIR: (INAUDIBLE) I will.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much.

16 All right.

17 RABAH BELKEBIR: Thank you. God bless you.
18 Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Last call
20 for you, Yu Chin Wu (phonetic), Ed Shulman
21 (phonetic), Ronald Ledford, Bernard Wright, and Ryan
22 Graham. Last call, anyone? Yu Chin Wu, Edward
23 Shulman, Ronald Ledford, Bernard Wright, or Ryan
24 Graham. Anyone on the call?

2 Okay. All right. Thank you so much and
3 thank you all for a great hearing, and I want to
4 thank all the panelists and anyone who testified and,
5 again, my office will respond to any inquiries on
6 this topic or other topics concerning veterans. Thank
7 you so much. This hearing is adjourned. [GAVEL]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date December 30, 2024