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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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Tuesday, June 10, 2025  
Start: 11:09 a.m.  
Recess: 12:57 a.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - Committee Room  
14th Floor

B E F O R E: Hon. Robert F. Holden, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola  
Kristy Marmorato  
Sandy Nurse  
Vickie Paladino

Other Council Members Attending: Won

A P P E A R A N C E S

James Hendon,  
Commissioner of the New York City Department of  
Veterans Services (DVS)

Nicole Orlando,  
Director of Veteran Transition of the New York  
City Department of Veterans Services (DVS)

Michael Bocchini,  
Senior Executive Director of Veteran Support  
Services of the New York City Department of  
Veterans Services (DVS)

Jaclyn Kelly,  
Director of New York City Labor Market  
Information Service and Applied Research Center  
at the CUNY Graduate Center

Ryan Graham,  
Veterans of Foreign Wars

Anthony Cibelli,  
Veteran and Advocate

Rabah Belkebir,  
New York State Disabled Veterans Vendors

Christopher Leon Johnson,  
Self

Timothy Pena,  
Founder of Veterans Justice Project

Ashton Stewart,  
Veterans Program Manager for the MJHS Health  
System; Member of the Veteran Advisory Board;  
Member of the Board of Visitors at Saint Albans

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2  
3 SERGEANT KUSHNER: This is a microphone check  
4 for the Committee on Veterans located on the 14th  
5 floor; recorded on June 10, 2025, by Pat Kurzyna.

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, good morning,  
7 welcome to the New York City Council Hearing for the  
8 Committee on Veterans. At this time, please silence  
9 all electronic devices, and do not approach the dais.  
10 I repeat, please do not approach the dais.

11 If you are testifying today, you may fill out a  
12 slip with the Sergeant at Arms at the back of the  
13 room. If you have any questions, you may also contact  
14 a sergeant. Thank you for your cooperation.

15 Chair, you may begin.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sergeant.

17 [GAVEL]

18 Good morning, I am Council Member Robert  
19 Holden, and I am Chair of the Committee on Veterans.  
20 Welcome to our oversight hearing on *Increasing Self-*  
21 *Identification by New York City Veterans*. In addition  
22 to our important oversight topic, we will be hearing  
23 Resolution Number 896, sponsored by Council Member  
24 Julie Won, recognizing June 25, 2025, as the 75th  
25 anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War and

1  
2 commemorating June 25th annually as Korean War  
3 Remembrance Day in the City of New York to honor  
4 those who served and to express hope for a lasting  
5 peace.

6           And now for our oversight topic, at many of the  
7 hearings of our Committee in the past year, DVS  
8 (Department of Veterans' Services) Commissioner  
9 Hendon has expressed his concerns about the lack of  
10 self-identification by New York City Veterans. And he  
11 has talked about efforts DVS has made, often in  
12 conjunction with its government and nongovernmental  
13 partners, to encourage more Veterans to self-  
14 identify. In this hearing, at our recent -- by the  
15 way, in his testimony at our recent April 28th  
16 hearing, Commissioner Hendon noted, and I quote,  
17 "Much of our work aims to bring Veterans into the  
18 light." It is an important statement. And it seems to  
19 be at the very foundation of DVS's mission, as well  
20 as to understand that no programs and services can be  
21 provided for our Veterans by DVS or any other  
22 government agency, nonprofit provider, or higher  
23 education institution if Veterans do not self-  
24 identify. And that is simply to make known that they  
25 are Veterans to agencies, institutions, and

1 organizations that can help them access benefits to  
2 which they are entitled. Our committee understands  
3 that there are many reasons why Veterans do not self-  
4 identify. The Commissioner has gone over that many  
5 times with us. Sometimes it is because of the  
6 difficult, looming mental, physical, and emotional  
7 effects of their service. Sometimes it is because of  
8 the fear of being stereotyped as former military.  
9 Sometimes it's because they don't want to have to  
10 defend their actions while they were deployed.  
11 Sometimes it is because of the fear of having to  
12 answer inappropriate questions about their service  
13 posed by individuals who never served. Over the past  
14 18 months or so, a study was conducted in New York  
15 City in cooperation with DVS by the New York City  
16 Labor Market Information Service and the Applied  
17 Research Center, located within the Center for Urban  
18 Research at the City University of New York Graduate  
19 Center. Results of that study were presented this  
20 May, and we are looking forward to hearing more about  
21 the study at this hearing. We know that, based on  
22 federal government data, for Fiscal Year 2023, only  
23 34% of Veterans nationwide self-identified. Those  
24 figures are even lower for New York State, which is  
25

1  
2 about 30% of almost 700,000 Veterans who live in New  
3 York State. And it's even lower in New York City,  
4 which is now only about 24% of the more than 200,000  
5 Veterans that DVS estimates live here. This is a  
6 problem nationwide, but it is more pronounced  
7 locally. We also know that DVS does a lot of work to  
8 boost that 24% figure so that all of our Veterans can  
9 get the benefits that they deserve. So there is a  
10 long way to go here, folks, and that's why we are  
11 having this hearing. We look forward to hearing about  
12 the work that DVS is doing now and is planning to do  
13 in order to raise that 24% figure.

14 At this time, I would like to acknowledge my  
15 colleagues who are here, Council Member Nurse and  
16 Council Member Marmorato. I would also like to thank  
17 the Committee staff who worked on this hearing:  
18 Regina Paul to my right, our Senior Policy Analyst,  
19 Phariha Rahman, our Financial Analyst, and finally,  
20 Dan Kurzyna, my Chief of Staff, and my Legislative  
21 Director, Will Dougherty.

22 I now would like to turn it over to Regina Paul  
23 to administer the oath to the witnesses of the  
24 Administration.  
25

1  
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Please raise your right  
3 hand.

4 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole  
5 truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony  
6 before this committee, and to respond honestly to  
7 council members' questions?

8 *PANEL AFFIRMS*

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

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: James Hendon, Commissioner  
13 of the New York City Department of Veterans Services.

14 DIRECTOR ORLANDO: Nicole Orlando, Director of  
15 Veteran Transition.

16 SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Senior Executive  
17 Director of Veteran Support Services.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Before we begin, I just  
19 want to wish a happy birthday to the Army, which is  
20 celebrating its 250th birthday this coming Saturday,  
21 June 14th. I also want to call out Women's Veterans  
22 Day, which we are observing this Wednesday, June  
23 12th, and acknowledge the late Congressman Charlie  
24 Rangel, Korean War Veteran, Chairman of the Ways and  
25

1  
2 Means Committee, who passed away on Memorial Day this  
3 year. So, I just wanted to say those things.

4 Good morning, Chair Holden, members of the  
5 Veterans Committee, members of the City Council, and  
6 members of New York City's Veteran community joining  
7 us today. My name is James Hendon. I have the honor  
8 of serving as Commissioner of the New York City  
9 Department of Veterans' Services – or DVS. I am  
10 joined today by members of our leadership team,  
11 Nicole Orlando, our agency's Director of Veteran  
12 Transition, along with Michael Bocchini, Senior  
13 Executive Director for Veterans' Support Services. We  
14 thank the Committee for convening today's hearing on  
15 Veteran self-identification – a subject that directly  
16 impacts how Veterans are counted, connected, and  
17 served in our city.

18 Veteran self-identification is not just a  
19 bureaucratic checkbox. It is a foundation for  
20 resource access, community voice, and public policy.  
21 When Veterans do not self-identify, they often go  
22 without the services they have earned, and their  
23 needs go unrecognized by the very systems meant to  
24 support them.



1  
2 Today, we aim to provide a clear and data-  
3 informed picture of this issue. Our testimony will  
4 cover what Veteran self-identification means and why  
5 it matters; The working theories DVS has developed to  
6 explain why we believe a majority of Veterans choose  
7 not to self-identify; what we are hearing directly  
8 from the Veteran and Military Family community; what  
9 the City, through DVS, the City Council, and other  
10 partners, is doing to address this issue, and what  
11 the Council can do to help ensure that all New York  
12 City Veterans are visible, valued, and engaged.

13 We appreciate the opportunity to speak with you  
14 today and to advance solutions rooted in shared  
15 purpose.

16 VETERAN SELF-IDENTIFICATION DEFINED:

17 Veteran self-identification is the act of  
18 disclosing one's military service in interactions  
19 with government, healthcare systems, employers,  
20 schools, community organizations, and other entities.  
21 At its best, self-identification opens access to  
22 earned resources. At its worst – when absent – it  
23 closes doors, conceals need, and diminishes the  
24 policy voice of the Veteran community.

1  
2 This issue is not new. It has persisted across  
3 generations. According to research from Economist  
4 Murray Rothbard, in 1891, the percentage of Civil War  
5 Veterans who received War-related pensions was 39.3%.  
6 As reported by the federal government years later,  
7 38.2% of World War Veterans eligible for  
8 rehabilitation from the Veterans Bureau (a precursor  
9 to the VA) completed the program by 1928 (that is,  
10 129,000 out of 337,000 eligible people).

11 Among World War II Era Veterans, roughly 48% of  
12 service members, or 7.8 million out of 16.1 million  
13 Korean War Era Vets, used the GI Bill education  
14 benefits; a majority did not use the benefits.

15 For Korean War Era Veterans, 2.4 million out of  
16 5.7 million eligible Veterans used the GI Bill  
17 altogether – a utilization rate of 42%.

18 Today, we see the same pattern. According to  
19 the U S. Department of Veterans Affairs, just 34.3%  
20 of Veterans self-identify nationwide. In New York  
21 State, that number declines to 29.8%. In New York  
22 City, it falls further to 24.1%.

23 A caveat: The federal proxy we use for self-  
24 identification is the ratio of unique patients  
25 utilizing VA healthcare to the estimated number of

1  
2 Veterans eligible for care. A recent CUNY survey  
3 mirrors these findings, indicating that only 22% to  
4 28% of surveyed New York City Veterans disclose their  
5 status. Twenty-two percent of New York City Veterans  
6 tell new people they meet that they are a Veteran;  
7 the rest do not. Twenty-eight percent of individuals  
8 tell acquaintances they know that they are Veterans  
9 (i.e., classmates, co-workers, neighbors, fellow  
10 parishioners, etc.), while the rest do not.

11 Speaking beyond New York City, the Veterans  
12 self-identification rate using the VA standard varies  
13 from 23.4% to 36.6% in the largest 10 counties in the  
14 nation.

15 Self-identification rates for the 10 largest  
16 counties in America follow, and note this excludes  
17 Kings County, one of the 10 largest counties, but it  
18 is a part of New York City:

19 Los Angeles County, CA: 27.4%

20 Cook County, IL (Chicago): 29.3%

21 Harris County, TX (Houston): 30.4%

22 Maricopa County, AZ (Phoenix): 28.8%

23 San Diego County, CA: 32.8%

24 Orange County, CA: 23.4%

25 Miami-Dade County, FL: 29.9%

Dallas County, TX: 29.2%

Riverside County, CA: 35.6%

Clark County Nevad (Las Vegas): 36.6%

Self-identification matters. When Veterans do not self-identify, they miss services. More critically, programs miss Veterans. Over time, this lack of engagement can weaken the case for sustaining or expanding offerings. We saw this play out in the 2022 Asset Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission Report, which recommended the closure or "realignment" of VA Medical Centers in Manhattan and Brooklyn due to low utilization.

Quoting the report, the justification used for closing the Manhattan VA Medical Center was: "Enrollment in New York County, where the Manhattan VAMC is located, is projected to decrease by 21.9% from 13,594 Enrollees in FY 2019 to 10,614 in FY 2029.

As Veterans continue to migrate out of Manhattan, the Manhattan VAMC faces reduced demand and underutilization of its oversized, aged facility.

Quoting the justification specific to the Brooklyn VA Medical Center: "The population served by the Brooklyn VAMC is declining. Enrollment in Kings

1 County, where Brooklyn is located, is projected to  
2 decrease by 21.7%, from 20,484 enrollees in FY 2019  
3 to 16,043 Enrollees in FY 2029."

4  
5 The VA's projected underuse stems in part from  
6 a lack of self-identification. To be clear, there are  
7 more than enough Veterans to fill New York's VA  
8 hospitals today and in the future. In FY23, 197,534  
9 Veterans received treatment at VA healthcare  
10 facilities in New York. Case in point: the VA  
11 projects that 280,499 Veterans will reside in New  
12 York by 2050 – far more than the number of Veterans  
13 the VA currently serves. This assumes no wars,  
14 conflicts, or other future shocks that increase the  
15 size of the Military/Veteran population. That being  
16 said, unless Veterans in New York self-identify, our  
17 associated healthcare facilities remain at risk, not  
18 for lack of need, but for lack of visibility.

19 WHY VETERANS WOULDN'T SELF-IDENTIFY: DVS'S  
20 WORKING THEORIES:

21 Based on our experience, conversations with  
22 community members, and analysis of public data, DVS  
23 has developed several working theories to help  
24 explain why we believe that a majority of New York  
25 City Veterans do not self-identify.

1  
2           1. *Humility and Deference:*

3           Many Veterans minimize their service,  
4 believing others are more deserving of support.

5           2. *Societal Stereotypes:*

6           The public narrative often casts Veterans as  
7 either invincible heroes or irreparably damaged. Many  
8 reject both cliches, choosing silence over self-  
9 identification. Some Veterans feel as though as soon  
10 as they tell someone they served in the Armed Forces,  
11 they are treated with a victim-hero mentality. It is  
12 assumed that they are broken, and/or they are  
13 infantilized.

14           3. *Civil-Military Divide:*

15           With fewer Americans serving, fewer have direct  
16 ties to a Veteran. This results in less understanding  
17 and more reliance on unchallenged assumptions. For  
18 context: in 1980, the year I was born, approximately  
19 18% of all Americans were U.S. military Veterans.  
20 That proportion is 6.1% today.

21           4. *Policy-based Exclusion:*

22           Definitions of "Veteran" vary by benefit, often  
23 excluding Sentinels based on their length of service,  
24 type of service, and/or discharge status. In  
25 contrast, New York City recognizes all who have

1 served, regardless of those qualifiers. The  
2 definition of "Veteran" per Section 3101, Chapter 75  
3 of the New York City Charter, "A person who serves or  
4 has served in the active military service, including  
5 the Navy, Coast Guard, Air Force, Marines, Army,  
6 Space Force, and their respective national guard or  
7 reserve components, regardless of discharge status or  
8 time served."

9  
10 *5. Lack of Outreach:*

11 Despite a proposed FY26 budget of \$441.3  
12 billion, second only to the Department of Defense,  
13 the US Department of Veterans Affairs has no  
14 dedicated line item specifically for marketing.  
15 Services are not broadly promoted, leaving many  
16 unaware of what they have earned.

17 *6. Psychological Distance:*

18 Some Veterans carry burdens they would rather  
19 not revisit. To identify as a Veteran is, for some,  
20 to move closer to painful memories.

21 *7. Evolving Expectations:*

22 Many Global War on Terror Era Veterans  
23 volunteered to serve and expect the system to  
24 reciprocate. This is in contrast to World War II  
25 Veterans, where 39% volunteered to serve, and the

1 rest were conscripted. And Vietnam Veterans, where  
2 approximately 75% of Service Members in combat zones  
3 were volunteers, the rest were draftees. Given that  
4 today's younger and middle-aged Veterans originate  
5 from an all-volunteer force, they are less inclined  
6 to join traditional Veteran Service Organizations  
7 where Veterans are often expected to facilitate the  
8 delivery of VA services for themselves, or to  
9 advocate through bureaucratic channels. Those who did  
10 serve and are in their prime often gravitate toward  
11 experiential, impact-driven models like Team Red,  
12 White, and Blue, the Travis Manion Foundation, Hope  
13 for the Warriors, and our Mission Continues.

14  
15 These theories are not exhaustive, but they  
16 help illuminate why self-identification remains a  
17 challenge and why public institutions must endeavor  
18 to meet Veterans where they are.

19 WHAT THE COMMUNITY IS TELLING US:

20 These patterns are echoed in what we hear daily  
21 from Veterans, families, and community partners. From  
22 Veteran Service Organizations, many posts report  
23 declining membership, aging leadership, and fewer  
24 people able to maintain operations. In some cases,  
25 facilities fall into disrepair due to limited



1  
2 capacity, not lack of care. As a datapoint: the most  
3 common Department of Buildings violation for New York  
4 City Veterans Service Organization posts involves the  
5 post's difficulty in maintaining the building's  
6 boiler.

7 CAREGIVERS:

8 Because 70.7% of NYC Veterans are age 55 or  
9 Older, 53.5% are age 65 or older, and 31.8% are age  
10 75 or older, many first-time contacts with DVS occur  
11 when an older Veteran is in a moment of crisis during  
12 a housing emergency, hospice admission, or sudden  
13 loss of income. A caregiver, supporter, or relative,  
14 not the Veteran themselves, is often the first person  
15 to reach out to us.

16 VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD (VAB):

17 The VAB continues to advocate for more Veterans  
18 participating in civic life, including joining  
19 community boards and running for public office. No  
20 Veteran currently serves on the New York City  
21 Council. Absence is a symptom of a broader lack of  
22 self-identification.

23 MILITARY FAMILIES:  
24  
25

1  
2 Spouses, siblings, and children of Service  
3 Members often do not disclose their military  
4 connection unless prompted.

5 CIVIC ADVOCATES:

6 Among street vendors and those navigating the  
7 shelter system, only a small subset publicly  
8 advocates. In a large community, that's manageable.  
9 In a smaller, undercounted one, it leads to skewed  
10 perceptions and policy confusion.

11 SURVEY INSIGHTS:

12 2024-25 New York City Veteran and Military  
13 Community Survey showed that 73% of Veterans who do  
14 not currently self-identify would consider doing so  
15 if engaged appropriately. Housing, financial  
16 benefits, and cultural programming are among the most  
17 compelling entry points. Many also report feeling  
18 that their non-Veteran identities, related to race,  
19 religion, gender, or orientation, are not adequately  
20 acknowledged in traditional outreach efforts.

21 WHAT THE CITY IS DOING:

22 DVS and City partners, including the City  
23 Council, are pursuing a multi-pronged approach to  
24 address Veteran self-identification:  
25

1  
2 Mission: VetCheck or direct wellness calls that  
3 build trust and re-engagement.

4 VetConnect NYC Reboot – A modernized digital  
5 referral system that streamlines service access.

6 Military Family Advocate Program – Embedding  
7 support for military-connected students and families  
8 in New York City public schools.

9 Data Sharing – Sharing geographically delimited  
10 contact information with government stakeholders  
11 (i.e., city, State, and federal agencies, elected  
12 officials, etc.) to boost outreach efforts.

13 Dwyer Program – Funding non-clinical, peer-led  
14 engagement programs citywide.

15 Veteran Resource Center Initiative – Ensuring  
16 that a Veteran Service Officer accredited to file VA  
17 Claims is regularly available in each Council  
18 Member's district office to help constituents.

19 Local Law 37 – Requiring city agencies to pose  
20 a Veteran identification question on client-facing  
21 forms.

22 We are also reinforcing core offerings that  
23 bring Veterans into systems of support:

24 Housing – Expanding access and navigation  
25 across all housing types.

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2           Claims – Through Veteran Resource Centers  
3 (VRCs) with regular hours in all five boroughs, VA-  
4 accredited Veteran service officers, and outreach  
5 "pop-up" VRCs.

6           Employment & Education – Expanding Veteran  
7 hiring, entrepreneurial pathways, and awareness of  
8 underutilized programs like the New York State  
9 Veteran Tuition Award Program and 55-A.

10           WHAT THE COUNCIL CAN DO:

11           We respectfully offer the following  
12 recommendations to support Veteran self-  
13 identification:

14           1. Ask the Question: Include Local Law 37  
15 Veteran Identification in all District Constituent  
16 Intake Forms.

17           2. Strengthen the Network: Require Council  
18 discretionary funding recipients to offer Veteran  
19 programming to coordinate with DVS and to join  
20 VetConnect NYC.

21           3. Use the Data: Leverage the Veteran contact  
22 information shared with your offices, through the  
23 Speaker, for outreach and connection.

24           4. Make Introductions: Connect DVS to the top  
25 three community based organizations in your district.

1  
2 DVS, partnering with those entities, will expand  
3 frontline Veteran visibility and also lead to more  
4 community organizations becoming service providers in  
5 VetConnect NYC.

6 5. Advance Structural Support: Support  
7 implementation of the Street Vendor Advisory Board  
8 Law, the proposal that establishes a Veteran's seat  
9 on the Street Vendor Advisory Board. And consider  
10 codifying the Veteran Business Leadership  
11 Association, or VBLA, into law.

12 In conclusion, at DVS, we understand that self-  
13 identification is not simply about checking a box. It  
14 is about trust. It is about being seen, not just as a  
15 Veteran, but as a whole person. We are committed to  
16 helping more New Yorkers come into the light and step  
17 into the services, benefits, and leadership roles  
18 they deserve. We thank the Council for your continued  
19 partnership.

20 If you need us, then know that the NYC  
21 Department of Veterans' Services can be reached at  
22 [nyc.gov/vets](http://nyc.gov/vets), 212-416-5250, [connect@Veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@Veterans.nyc.gov),  
23 and using the social media handle @nycVeterans. Thank  
24 you.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Commissioner.  
3 Again, wonderful testimony.

4 We have been joined by Council Member Ariola,  
5 Council Member Paladino, and Council Member Won.

6 I just want to introduce Council Member Julie  
7 Won, who will talk about her Resolution Number 896.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER WON: Good morning, thank you so  
9 much, Chair Holden, for convening today's Committee  
10 on Veterans oversight hearing for Increasing  
11 Identification by New York City Veterans, and thank  
12 you to the Commissioner who just testified.

13 Today, we are hearing my Resolution, 896, which  
14 will recognize June 25th as the 75th anniversary of  
15 the Korean War and recognize this day annually as  
16 Korean War Remembrance Day in New York City.

17 The Korean War is a devastating memory that  
18 still affects many American Veterans, Korean natives,  
19 and immigrants; 2.5 million people lost their lives,  
20 and many had their livelihoods taken away.  
21 Negotiations finally ended the war in 1954, but  
22 tension still continued to exist.

23 With Korean Remembrance Day, we are honoring  
24 those who served and sacrificed their lives for the  
25 well-being of our country, especially my home

1  
2 country, and the innocent lives tragically lost in  
3 the conflict. But we will also have this day  
4 instilled with hope within us that one day, we will  
5 come to a resolution to ease all tensions between  
6 North and South Korea and to establish a lasting  
7 peace.

8           As a first-generation Korean immigrant, I know  
9 firsthand the significance of never forgetting so  
10 that we can continue to put in the work for our  
11 future, for ourselves, and our future generations.

12           I give my deepest condolences to everyone who  
13 has lost loved ones in the fight. And I just want to  
14 recognize my grandparents, who lived through the war,  
15 as well as other relatives, many of whom have lost  
16 their relatives. If you're on the wrong side of the  
17 DMZ, if you happened to be running from the war on  
18 both sides, and you ended up on the other side, you  
19 are never able to see your siblings or your husband  
20 or your children ever again. So it is still a war  
21 that still lives within my family, and the stories  
22 that my grandmother would tell me about her siblings.

23           So thank you so much for serving in the Korean  
24 War, to all who have served. And thank you to our  
25 chair, Bob Holden, who has continued to recognize

1  
2 this war and in respect to all the Veterans. And  
3 thank all the Veterans for risking their lives for  
4 our nation's protection.

5 I also want to give a shout-out to my sister,  
6 Sandy Nurse, who also lived in South Korea in her  
7 childhood. Thank you

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Council Member.  
9 My father-in-law served in the Korean War, also in  
10 World War II, so he was a 20-year serviceman, and he  
11 spoke in detail with me, especially about the Korean  
12 War. Here's a soldier who was at Normandy, but then  
13 he parachuted behind enemy lines. But he talked about  
14 how vicious and brutal, especially the cold of the  
15 Korean War, he was at the retreat, you know, the  
16 first part of the war. So, I got firsthand knowledge  
17 of the brutality of the war, but he spoke mostly  
18 about the weather, that it was brutal, brutal war.  
19 And they worked ill-equipped. So this is a great  
20 Resolution. I thank you for introducing it, and  
21 hopefully, we can vote on it.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER WON: And I just want to add one  
23 more thing. My grandfather, especially when we first  
24 moved to America, the only thing he really wanted us  
25 to send back were the classic Hershey Chocolate bars.



1  
2 He would talk about how the American soldiers, one,  
3 he also acknowledged and always appreciated that,  
4 without the US, all of us would have been slaughtered  
5 and killed, and we would have been living under  
6 communism. But, also, he would say that the American  
7 soldiers were always so kind and gave out Hershey  
8 Bars for free to all of the children and the elders  
9 throughout Korea.

10 CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: Yes, thank you for that.  
11 All of those things, again, we have to pass down. And  
12 I pass that down to my children about my father-in-  
13 law. So we have to keep that chain going, because  
14 it's sometimes the forgotten war. But, again, I  
15 remember they called it "police action"; during the  
16 war, I was alive during the Korean War, which was an  
17 odd description.

18 Anyway, thank you, Commissioner. And I have  
19 some questions. As you touched upon, the New York  
20 City rate is seriously low compared to others. I  
21 mean, it's low everywhere, but nationwide, 34%, it's  
22 a little better, but not much better.

23 Why are most cities and states struggling with  
24 the same problem? And you touched upon a bit of it.  
25 And I think you also mentioned a marketing campaign,

1  
2 which is important. If the VA did that, maybe we  
3 could get a higher rate of self-identification.

4 But in other cities, we looked at San Antonio,  
5 and they're like 49%. You didn't touch upon that one,  
6 but I'd like to know what they're doing. Maybe we  
7 could figure it out because they have the highest  
8 rate that I've seen in the nation. Our numbers differ  
9 slightly from yours, but it's a problem. What are we  
10 doing about it at DVS? Do you have any target numbers  
11 in mind that you'd like to achieve with a larger  
12 budget to encourage Veterans to self-identify?

13 The thing that you mentioned that was striking  
14 was about the hospitals closings or the possibility  
15 of it. So, it's almost like an ad campaign. Since I  
16 come from advertising, the first thing that comes to  
17 mind is how to market this. And it's almost like if  
18 we could say to Veterans, it's your duty to your  
19 fellow Veterans to self-identify your duty, use the  
20 word "duty" to try to get more to self-identify.

21 But maybe you could just talk about some of the  
22 things that you've done already. Do you have a target  
23 number?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for that, Mr.  
25 Chair.

1  
2 I just want to comment on Council Member Won's  
3 comments regarding 896, briefly, so that we're on  
4 record as saying we fully support this.

5 I just want the record to show that during the  
6 Korean War, from June 25th, 1950, to July 27th, 1953,  
7 5.7 million served in the armed forces at that time,  
8 1.8 million were in the theater. Of the 1.8 million  
9 in theater, 103,284 were wounded in action; 33,574,  
10 the ultimate sacrifice, died while in service in  
11 theater, more than 7,500 are missing in action right  
12 now from Korea. So, I just want to acknowledge that  
13 we very much support this Resolution. I just want to  
14 say that, first and foremost, thank you so much for  
15 your leadership.

16 Mr. Chair, as far as the question of what we  
17 can do and what's being done - it's funny, you know,  
18 you mentioned San Antonio, the list that I read off  
19 was the top 10 of the largest cities or largest  
20 counties in America. So, when I think about Keith  
21 Wilson, my counterpart who runs Veteran Services in  
22 Bexar County, I'm not sure of the exact name, but  
23 it's in San Antonio. So, San Antonio is not on that  
24 list; it's lower. It's a big city, but it's lower.  
25 It's still less than half, and to me, if we're

1  
2 grading people, anything less than I'd argue 67%, we  
3 have such a long way to go. So, for perspective, to  
4 me, it's still that more than half of these folks  
5 aren't identifying. And when we look at what we can  
6 do to address this, you have to underscore that this  
7 is not a new problem; it's something that's been  
8 around for generations, as far as Veterans not  
9 identifying. So, we're trying to be intentional  
10 about how we can crack the code here. I have to say,  
11 when we look at Veterans, I always tell people, you  
12 know, everyone knows what USAA is, but very few of  
13 our Veterans know what their benefits are. USAA is a  
14 \$36 billion company, and as far as its revenues are  
15 concerned, they're just focusing on a financial  
16 product, and they focus like a laser on that. For us,  
17 Veterans are all colors, all shapes, all creeds, all  
18 religions, all disability types. You have this very  
19 diverse community, and different people have  
20 different things that appeal to them. The survey  
21 indicates that affordable housing is a key factor in  
22 its appeal. It tells us that access to monetary  
23 benefits is a key piece that is of appeal. And that  
24 maintaining the healthcare, they love having  
25 healthcare access through it. So, for us, it's about

1  
2 designing an engagement approach that allows us to  
3 connect with various types of people and their  
4 different archetypes. This way, we can appeal to  
5 something that resonates with you, even if it doesn't  
6 with the other Veteran or the other person. So, how  
7 do you get this in a way that's universal,  
8 recognizing that you've got a backdrop where, at the  
9 federal level? They've not done anything to advance  
10 this.

11 I just want to say those things, kind of...

12 (CROSS-TALK)

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's my next question,  
14 because what could they do? And you talked about  
15 marketing, but I mean, it's almost like a Catch-22  
16 here. It's almost like if more Veterans did self-  
17 identify, what would that do to the budget of the VA?  
18 You know, what does that do to any budget? What does  
19 it do to your budget? What does it do to the state?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to answer that.

21 And I want us to step higher than that for a moment.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right.

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: But I'll answer that. When  
24 you look at the gross, uh, the geographic  
25 distribution of VA expenditures reported, the GDX

1  
2 report the VA puts out, take New York City for  
3 example. So, it's 24.1% of Veterans, which equates to  
4 \$1.9 billion in total expenditures in New York City.  
5 So 24% is resulting in \$1.9 billion. If we were at  
6 100% that would be a total of \$7.9 billion. So  
7 effectively we're leaving roughly \$6 billion on the  
8 table right now, which would be able to come in, if  
9 all people who are able to self-identify using the  
10 VA's... (CROSS-TALK)

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Six billion dollars to New  
12 York City -- You're saying \$6 billion to New York  
13 City?

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's what I'm saying. If  
15 you close the gap between 24.1% to 100%, you get to a  
16 point where everyone's identified, that's the total  
17 expenditure. So we already received \$1.9 billion for  
18 those who are identified, it would go from \$1.9  
19 billion to \$7.9 billion if we got from (INAUDIBLE)...  
20 (CROSS-TALK)

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So it would actually  
22 benefit New York City if we increased DVS's budget.  
23 Right? As an investment to get more money to try to  
24 get more Veterans to self-identify. That means  
25 communication. So, that's a great argument that I

1  
2 could give the Administration. Thank you,  
3 Commissioner, for that.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We'll always do more with  
5 more, as we always say, Mr. Chair.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, no, you're -- I'm  
7 not -- again, we need to invest in our Veterans, and  
8 it'll pay off in the city economy, wouldn't it? You  
9 just mentioned that.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: What's tricky about this  
11 is -- I'm with you. What's tricky about this is,  
12 let's take that same metric and go national. Uh,  
13 34.3% self-identification, right now it's about \$285  
14 billion is the total expenditure, as far as  
15 (INAUDIBLE). This is not the admin stuff, but the  
16 money that goes down range is \$285 billion. If you  
17 extrapolate that same logic, what does it take for me  
18 to get to 100% to get to everyone? Then the outlay  
19 jumps up to \$545 billion. I just mentioned the  
20 proposed VA budget is just over \$400 billion. So,  
21 this goes back to the policy makers being a little  
22 fearful at the federal level, if we do this right, do  
23 we have the money actually to do this? Can we pay the  
24 full cost of being right by these men and women who  
25 served? And, then to me, the meta issue, I think the

1 original sin is that no one spoke with you about  
2 every chapter of your life from day one. When you  
3 first signed up to join, it was very transactional.  
4 It was about talking to you in ways that were just  
5 what you would do for me as a defense department, and  
6 what I would do for you as a service member in the  
7 near term. We didn't talk with people about all  
8 chapters of their life, including when they take the  
9 uniform off, including their families. So, I think  
10 that was the original sin. It leads to this universal  
11 situation. This thing that is across communities, it  
12 is across conflict eras, it's across time. So, that  
13 is a larger conversation. We're trying to get a  
14 handle on this right now at DVS by making contact  
15 with those who are just signing up for the military,  
16 working with our academic institutions, and putting  
17 our hands on those who are just signing up for the  
18 military. We are also working to put our hands on  
19 folks as soon as they get out of the military, so we  
20 know who they are, so that it is hard for you to go  
21 into the dark if I identify you right away, and we  
22 are already communicating. So, we are trying with  
23 those who are already beyond that - to work with  
24 different community organizations, who with our  
25



1  
2 elected officials to get in front of people as far  
3 as, we got to keep asking that question, have you or  
4 anyone in your family served? Have you or anyone in  
5 your family served?

6         So, one other thing I'll mention, and I'll  
7 stop, and I'll defer to anybody who has anything we  
8 are very excited about, just over two weeks ago, we  
9 shared all the information we had on the Veterans  
10 that we are tracking in New York City with the  
11 Speaker's Office. And I believe it to be confirmed  
12 through Council Connect to all of our council  
13 members. So, for us, we believe that it can't just be  
14 DVS asking. It has to be our council members asking  
15 these questions, too, or knowing these people and  
16 trying to touch them. It has to be - we also shared  
17 assembly members, we share with our state senators,  
18 we are going through a process at the federal level  
19 with the Ethics team at the federal level, we share  
20 with our federally elected officials, we share with  
21 the borough presidents. The agreement for the borough  
22 presidents allows them to share the information with  
23 the community boards. And this is broken down by  
24 district, by catchment area. So you can see, here are  
25 all the people in my district. All the people in this

1  
2 community board catchment. All the people in this  
3 senator's area, et cetera. And we are hoping, if all  
4 of us continue to reach out, continue to poke, to  
5 prod, that at some point, more of these boughs break,  
6 and our people come into the light.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Give me one thing that the  
8 VA could do tomorrow, if you had, you know, your  
9 wish, to try to get that number up from the low 30s  
10 to something like 50%?

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: There is marketing money.  
12 They just don't call it marketing money. They  
13 internally mask monies. And it's all at the  
14 headquarters right now, as far as the marketing that  
15 the VA does. A lot of things are done from the  
16 headquarters, putting out things that are not  
17 hyperlocal in nature. And they have hidden it within  
18 other programs. A, be transparent about our marketing  
19 budget, and B, delegate it down. Let the lower level  
20 leadership have some money to be able to do what they  
21 need to do to get the word out.

22 I had a medical center director, who is no  
23 longer in her seat, so I can say this, she said,  
24 "Look, if I put a billboard up on the Cross Bronx  
25 Expressway, talking about what we do at the Bronx VA,

1  
2 this place would be packed. Filled over and over  
3 again. But, I don't have the funds to do that." For  
4 me, it's being transparent about this marketing  
5 budget because there is money. But, also pushing that  
6 money down range to folks who do this work between  
7 the Veteran Benefits Administration, the Veteran  
8 Health Administration, and the National Cemetery  
9 Administration. Let those lower level leaders lead.  
10 They know their communities. They know their  
11 stakeholders. They know how to get this thing done.  
12 So, it's not even increasing the budget; it's taking  
13 existing money and delegating it out.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. We are  
15 contacting the billboard companies you mentioned, as  
16 they sometimes have damaged billboards or unbooked  
17 spaces. I brought this up several times at a hearing,  
18 and we approached one in my district that was  
19 unsightly, covered with graffiti, peeling, and we got  
20 them to replace the ad, and what they put up was a  
21 recruitment ad. And it stayed up for over a year. Now  
22 it's graffitied again. We've asked them to create an  
23 ad that we can design. The City could design it, or  
24 if they prefer, I can design it. That's my  
25 background, and I'll get it up. As a public service,

1  
2 we approached utility companies to see if we could  
3 piggyback on their mailings for bills. An insert  
4 would be for Veterans to self-identify. We seemed to  
5 hit a little dead end on that, because we had to get  
6 permission from the Public Service Commission. And  
7 they don't readily do that, but I think -- and, then,  
8 another reason was that the utility company was  
9 balking, because they said, well, if we did it for  
10 the Veterans, we'd have to do it for more  
11 organizations. I disagree, though, because I said the  
12 Veterans did something for us; we owe them more than  
13 anybody.

14           Anyway, that's where we are. I am still working  
15 on it. We have that.

16           What about the New York State Department of  
17 Veterans' Services? What could they do to help along  
18 with the VA?

19           COMMISSIONER HENDON: I am going to defer that  
20 to Mike...

21           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right.

22           COMMISSIONER HENDON: (INAUDIBLE) team to kind  
23 of ads and things. In my mind, the top three things  
24 that they do, as far as the State, and we appreciate  
25 the partnership, are claims, as far as helping

1  
2 Veterans file their claims, and accrediting others  
3 that do this work, like we are accredited by the  
4 State. They are the state approving authority; if  
5 anyone uses their education benefits, it has to be  
6 approved by an entity that housed within New York  
7 State Department of Veteran Services. Also, they  
8 manage the newly established State Veterans' Cemetery  
9 up in the Finger Lakes in Romulus, New York. Those  
10 are the things that they do right now. I am going to  
11 go to Mike to add on that.

12 SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Yeah, I would add,  
13 Commissioner Viviana DeCohen, who has been in the  
14 seat for about three or four years. Her number one  
15 priority, she calls it "find and serve", so she has  
16 devoted some resources towards marketing. They have  
17 set up kiosks in high-traffic areas, rest stops along  
18 New York State throughways, Grand Central, and Penn  
19 Station. They also have mobile outreach units, uh,  
20 these vans, so they can go to areas that don't have  
21 an accredited Veteran Service Officer. It would be  
22 great if they could send that down here into New York  
23 City and visit...

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

25

1  
2 SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: more of our  
3 neighborhoods.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. Because we are  
5 lagging behind the State. They should concentrate  
6 efforts here in New York City, where we have a very  
7 large Veteran population, with Queens being number  
8 one, right?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, I wanted to  
10 speak on trend lines, briefly, about that.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, go ahead.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: In every situation, with  
13 these top 10 cities I listed as far as the largest  
14 counties in the country, every situation, the  
15 utilization rate -- the identification rate in the  
16 city is lower than the identification rate in the  
17 state. So, this is not just a New York thing; it's a  
18 larger trend. One hypothesis suggests that you don't  
19 have as many older Veterans in those urban areas.  
20 They move out to more rural places, which is one of  
21 the reasons why.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, there are a lot  
23 of reasons, though. We can look into it. We are  
24 guessing, a lot of the time, we are guessing as to  
25 why they don't self-identify. I think you touched

1  
2 upon one. Obviously, they are humble, and they really  
3 feel that, "I don't need help, there's other Veterans  
4 that need more help than I do, and I'm fine." Also, I  
5 just feel that, at least New York City's excuse would  
6 be that we're a busy city, and we get on with our  
7 lives, and we don't look back, many of us. We don't  
8 want to look back. But we just don't need to look  
9 back. We look forward and try to survive every day in  
10 the city, and try to grow. So, think that, in a  
11 bustling city, there are more distractions and more  
12 certainly priorities, let's say, than to just ask for  
13 help or self-identify. But I think it is up to us to  
14 organize. And think we could do that in the City. I  
15 really feel that we could do a marketing campaign to  
16 help. And we could get that number up. I am going to  
17 stay with it as long as I can. I have six more  
18 months. And then, you'll take over. (LAUGHS) Somebody  
19 will take it over. (LAUGHTER)

20           How does DVS evaluate the success of its self-  
21 identification outreach program? What's working,  
22 other than what you had mentioned? What more could we  
23 do, and how do you measure it? Do you get more  
24 Veterans signing on? And I mentioned that target  
25 before. Obviously, you'd like the highest number.

1  
2 But, what do you think is reachable in your tenure as  
3 the Commissioner?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think what's realistic  
5 is looking at the survey. I enjoy the survey, because  
6 we have much more, I guess, uh, we have a great  
7 partnership with CUNY, which allows us to be very  
8 specific about, okay, this is good data that we're  
9 getting on this issue. And, once again, I'll repeat  
10 it: 22% of Veterans in New York City, per the survey,  
11 will tell someone they've never met before, "Hey, I  
12 served." It goes from 28%, if I'm talking to someone  
13 like a coworker, someone at my church, or my  
14 synagogue, or someone who is a neighbor.

15 I think using CUNY as a way to measure this  
16 through future surveys is our way to kind of an  
17 apples to apples comparison. I would rather do that  
18 than the VA data, because things in the federal  
19 government, things can change, and the numbers may  
20 not be as consistent. So, for us, it would be a goal  
21 of seeing an increase by at least 10 points in  
22 Veteran self-identification with our next survey. I  
23 think that would be the goal for us.

24

25



1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I think I would  
3 create a goal, let's get to the national average at  
4 least. I think that should be our target.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mm-hmm.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We shouldn't be lagging  
7 behind. And if we get to that point, we don't rest,  
8 but we say, at least we are not below average.  
9 Obviously, I think New York City Veterans have many  
10 more challenges than those around the country in  
11 smaller, rural areas. I think in New York City, the  
12 high cost of living means they may need the benefits  
13 more than areas with a lower cost of living. That's  
14 why it's important to bring that number up.

15 I have a few more questions, and do my  
16 colleagues - anybody?

17 How does DVS account for Veterans who move out  
18 of the City in its tally for self-identifying  
19 Veterans?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I am going to let Nicole  
21 lead with this as far as answering that.

22 (UNINTELLIGIBLE) If that's okay.

23 DIRECTOR ORLANDO: Yeah. Thank you, Chair  
24 Holden, and Council Members, for allowing us to be  
25 here today.

1  
2           So, within the survey that we looked at, and  
3 something that you mentioned before about the idea of  
4 that we're in New York, we're busy, something that  
5 our survey actually showed was that 188 respondents  
6 said that there are changes that could be made to  
7 help them come into the light. But 41% cited that the  
8 reason they weren't is because they are too busy. So  
9 with this survey, we see that there are people who do  
10 want to identify and who do want to be engaged, but  
11 they are citing other responsibilities, which means  
12 for us that there is more that needs to be done in  
13 terms of pulling into the light. And this is  
14 something Commissioner and I have discussed regarding  
15 client acquisition costs: what it would actually take  
16 to get someone out. So that is something that the  
17 survey has helped us to see.

18           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Commissioner, did  
19 you learn anything from the study by the New York  
20 City Labor Market Information Service, based at the  
21 CUNY Graduate Center, about Veterans in New York City  
22 that you didn't already know? Did you learn anything  
23 from that report?

24           COMMISSIONER HENDON: I will say a little bit,  
25 then I will throw it back to Nicole, who was the

1 person who really spearheaded this (INAUDIBLE)...

2 (CROSS-TALK)

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, all right.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Entirely. Bucket in two in  
5 different things. Some things were confirmed with us.

6 One was that the housing need is critical for our

7 people, as it is for all New Yorkers. I think 35%

8 responded that it's their top need out of eight or

9 nine different things. Affordable housing and the

10 need for it were at the top of the ticket. Another

11 one that was confirmed: many people are uncertain

12 about staying in New York City. We saw that 44% said

13 that they planned to stay in New York City, 13% are

14 uncertain, and 42% are thinking about or planning to

15 leave. So, it's this... (CROSS-TALK)

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, that's a high

17 number, yeah...

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: (INAUDIBLE), how do we

19 keep our folks, how do we keep them here? And then

20 another was just confirming self-identification was

21 an issue, as we have mentioned, as far as the numbers

22 that we got from the survey dovetail with the VA

23 data.

24  
25

1  
2           New things to us, as was mentioned in the  
3 testimony, it was clear that 73% of our brothers and  
4 sisters indicated that they can be reclaimed, as far  
5 as those who don't normally affiliate with that  
6 Veteran identity. They said, "Look, if you present  
7 the right things to me, come at me in the right way,  
8 we would be open to coming back and identifying."

9           Another one was that appreciation for  
10 healthcare, as I've mentioned. When you have a list  
11 of the largest challenges in the city, at the very  
12 bottom was healthcare. It was less than 1% who said  
13 healthcare was an issue. And then we talked about the  
14 top things they loved about being in the city, and  
15 healthcare access was one of the top three. So there  
16 is appreciation for that, the inclusivity of  
17 healthcare.

18           Another one, the larger takeaway, I think for  
19 me, and I will defer to my Mike and Nicole if there's  
20 anything they want to add, being seen through all  
21 identities, not just seeing me as a Veteran, but  
22 seeing me as someone who is Jewish. Not seeing me as  
23 a Veteran, but seeing me as someone who is a woman.  
24 Not seeing me as a Veteran, but seeing me as someone  
25 who is, et cetera, et cetera. There are folks who

1  
2 felt like they were not being seen in these other  
3 ways. So our way of working to triage that is looking  
4 to align more closely with community, cultural, and  
5 faith-based groups. Since they were likely the first  
6 groups to interact with someone and ask them to ask  
7 that question, to get more people into the fold.  
8 Anything that you wanted to add there?

9         DIRECTOR ORLANDO: Yeah, to just add to that, at  
10 our survey research presentation, we actually had a  
11 panel that had some student Veterans on it. And some  
12 of the feedback that we got was, for even student  
13 Veteran organizations, they don't want events or  
14 meetings just with other student Veterans. They want  
15 to bring in other student Veterans groups, whether  
16 that be a chess club, or other clubs at their school  
17 to be tied into it. They don't want it to be so  
18 separated. And that is something that we think we  
19 have seen also in the survey results, as Veterans  
20 want to be a part of all of these other groups that  
21 we speak about, not just segregated from them.

22         CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Is it a funding  
23 issue, though, for some of these groups, that many of  
24 them don't get funded?

25         DIRECTOR ORLANDO: Uh...

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Because that actually gets  
3 down -- that's almost like with DVS, too, it's like  
4 the funding is lacking, and then the communication  
5 breaks down. And, again, if you look at all the VA  
6 programs, the weak link in all -- I say this in New  
7 York City government, too, and state government, the  
8 weak link is communications. They don't tell us about  
9 the programs, or they don't reach out enough about  
10 the programs. So these programs sit, and money  
11 doesn't get spent, let's say, or doesn't get  
12 allocated.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I... (CROSS-TALK)

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We see that over and over  
15 again. But, go ahead, I'm sorry.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to put that in a  
17 different framework. I don't in any way disagree with  
18 what you are saying, Mr. Chair. I want to put it into  
19 a different framework for you. It's the feedback loop  
20 where, you know, take the posts that have the aging  
21 membership and may not have as much by way of  
22 resources or time, while that group is aging and  
23 aging, to do the things to get out in front of those  
24 younger Veterans. When we talk about the Veterans'  
25 Service Organization piece, as far as I think, that

1  
2 could be a piece of this. And to piggyback on  
3 something Nicole said, years ago, the Council, in its  
4 wisdom, passed a law that mandated a liaison, a  
5 Veterans liaison in each City agency. It's almost  
6 like saying you need a Veterans liaison in each group  
7 and club. Period. So, take that chess club, who's  
8 that Veterans' Liaison? Maybe that's our way in. Take  
9 that congregation, who's that Veterans' Liaison? That  
10 could be the way in, when people can see someone in  
11 that other identity who is tied back to us, that  
12 could be a new way to get at this.

13           DIRECTOR ORLANDO: To also just build on that,  
14 something that we have seen through the survey  
15 research and just the work that we do, is that the  
16 ambassador is so important. Especially when we are  
17 talking about getting more Veterans to self-identify.  
18 So if there is someone trusted in the community who  
19 self-identifies, they would be more likely to do so.  
20 And that is also some of the feedback that we got in  
21 the survey, they would be more likely to be engaged  
22 with someone who is a trusted (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-  
23 TALK)

24           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

25

1  
2           COMMISSIONER HENDON: We had somebody, I  
3 remember that Council Member Paladino had someone  
4 from her district who brought a Korean War Era  
5 Veteran, 90-some odd years old, who went to the same  
6 congregation, and he brought him into the office.  
7 This person hadn't served a day in his life, but he  
8 was that kind of person, you know, this was the kind  
9 of thing we needed as far as that trusted... (CROSS-  
10 TALK)

11           COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Right.

12           COMMISSIONER HENDON: ally within these spaces.

13           CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, I just want to  
14 touch upon a couple more questions, and then I think  
15 we're good, unless my colleagues have some.

16           What legislation currently in the Council would  
17 you list as a top priority of DVS?

18           COMMISSIONER HENDON: Forgive me for not having  
19 it in front of me, the legislation where, I know you  
20 presented it, Mr. Chair, that codifies some version  
21 of our Veteran Business Leadership Association,  
22 working with Small Business Services. That's  
23 important. When we look at Veterans, it's not just  
24 about job seekers; many of our people are self-  
25 employed, and entrepreneurship is key. And that's



1  
2 another way that people come into us as well-folks  
3 who may be thinking about starting up another  
4 business, who may come into Nicole's programming. So,  
5 I would argue that that is something that exists,  
6 that we definitely will support, and we support the  
7 legislation that places a Veterans' seat on the  
8 Street Vendors Advisory Board. We think that's key as  
9 far as (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that's good, yeah.

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I just wanted to put those  
12 things out there.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and we support that.  
14 And there are other bills that we are trying to  
15 advance... (CROSS-TALK)

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Oh, give me, I'm so sorry,  
17 I almost forgot, top of the ticket, I'd have to say  
18 Intro 740, from Council Member Carr, with the Cold  
19 War (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Cold War, yeah...

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: tax exemption,  
22 (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I thought you were going to  
24 mention...

1  
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: (INAUDIBLE) Yeah, I'm  
3 sorry... (CROSS-TALK)

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I was about to, all  
5 right... (CROSS-TALK)

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's important. It's an  
7 exemption for those who served during Peace Time Era.  
8 And the largest group we're talking about right now  
9 is the post-Vietnam into just before Desert  
10 Shield/Desert Storm, I think, 1975 to 1990. What is  
11 happening, and this came up in a Veterans' Advisory  
12 Board discussion just last week with the leaders  
13 there, you've got older Veterans looking at leaving,  
14 too, because they feel priced out. "I'm on a fixed  
15 income. I'm retired now. I don't know how to make  
16 this work." When we look at the 1975 to 1990 bracket,  
17 those are the folks who are entering retirement as  
18 far as Veterans within that (INAUDIBLE) stream. So  
19 this exemption being approved, it provides more  
20 relief, convincing more of our brothers and sisters  
21 who are here to stay.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Finally, what do  
23 you need from the City Council or the Mayor? By the  
24 way, the Mayor supports the Cold War Exemption,  
25 right? He did tell us that. But, what do you need

1  
2 from the City Council or the Mayor to identify more  
3 Veterans? Of course, you are going to say a larger  
4 budget and more staff. If we got that number up 10%,  
5 you would have a much higher workload. And obviously,  
6 your staff is going to be overworked to a degree,  
7 obviously.

8 So, besides a larger budget, how do we, you  
9 know, we are negotiating with the Mayor's Office to  
10 try to get more funding. We had talks. The Mayor  
11 seems to think that we could work something out. But  
12 not only is it the funding we need, but we need a  
13 larger staff in your office. The more staff, the more  
14 people who could be helped. Do you have a target on  
15 that? How many staff members would you need if we  
16 were successful in this?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, Mr. Chair, you know  
18 us, we can always do more with more. And we know  
19 these are ongoing fluid discussions between you all  
20 internally as far as the budget negotiations piece  
21 and what's going on with OMB. I just have to flag  
22 that, with the VA, as far as the VA healthcare  
23 system, the way this works is - so, I go to the Bronx  
24 VA. When I go in, as long as I go in at least once  
25 per year, there's an extra \$9,000 to \$12,000 placed

1 on the budget of the Bronx VA. Their budget gets  
2 increased based on utilization. So as more folks  
3 utilize it, those numbers that we quoted before keep  
4 going up. So, the VA also has more resources to be  
5 good partners with us when these things happen. We  
6 have faith that between the Council and the Mayor's  
7 team, they will come together and put resources in  
8 us, too, as the population increases. So I am not  
9 worried about those pieces. As more folks come into  
10 the light, we will find ways to tackle it. Also,  
11 we've got good partners left and right. Between  
12 public/private, nonprofit, and other entities, we  
13 know we can handle it if it comes. The most important  
14 thing, just moving the policy and the budget talk  
15 aside, Sir, is helping us as far as this data that  
16 we're sharing right now. We are doing everything we  
17 can to provide you with all the information we have,  
18 so you are aware of what we know. So, as we come at  
19 this together, if you need a co-partner when it comes  
20 to branding things or getting assets out with  
21 whatever you're sending, this is now the time to roll  
22 up our sleeves, "let's go get it," this is really the  
23 brass tacks of what is going on at the ground level  
24 with reaching out to our people. We will do what we  
25

1  
2 can, but if all 51 elected officials, including our  
3 City Council Members, assembly members, senators, and  
4 community board chairs, use the contact information  
5 to proactively engage with Veterans, we believe that  
6 things will move forward. That's the quickest thing  
7 we can do to move the needle; let's all be on deck to  
8 take advantage of this opportunity with the Veterans'  
9 contact information.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, I am just going  
11 to correct something I said before. I mentioned that  
12 San Antonio was at 49, they're not, they're 45.4%,  
13 Bexar County in San Antonio. So, I would think they  
14 probably have a good network of Veteran Service  
15 Organizations there. I think that would help. And, to  
16 me, I know it's the recruitment of some of the VSOs  
17 that is lacking. We'd like more. But I think if we  
18 funded them, that would go a long way in keeping them  
19 open. Many VSOs mention that they have a problem  
20 keeping the boilers operational. That's the number  
21 one thing. And I hear that over and over again.

22 So, that comes with funding. The City could do  
23 that. The City Council could do it. So, that's what  
24 we are working toward. But, if you look at the 10  
25 largest, and I don't know if my list is the same as

1  
2 your list, self-identification, you're right, they're  
3 all low.

4 But let's just talk about New York City for a  
5 second. New York City, the county lagging behind, is  
6 Manhattan. It is less than 20% at 19.4%. Bronx has  
7 the highest percentage at 30.33%. Thank you for your  
8 efforts. (LAUGHS) Queens, Vickie, is 21.7%, which is  
9 not great, and Brooklyn, same thing, 25%. Staten  
10 Island is 26%. So, all around the same, but Queens  
11 with the most (sic), we should try to get that up.  
12 And we are doing our part. At least in our Council  
13 offices, but it behooves every Council Member to push  
14 this in every district office.

15 Thank you, Commissioner, thank you so much. We  
16 thank you for your wonderful testimony. And if you  
17 could stay, I know you will, for the public  
18 testimony.

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

24

25

1  
2           The witness table is reserved for people who  
3 wish to testify. No video recording or photography is  
4 allowed from the witness table.

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

9           If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please  
10 fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms  
11 and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will  
12 have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic:  
13 "Increasing Self-Identification by New York City  
14 Veterans." That is the topic; let's stay on topic.

15           We will hear all the in-person testimony first  
16 and then turn to Zoom testimony.

17           And like I mentioned about the topic, this is  
18 an important topic, and this has a domino effect,  
19 like the Commissioner mentioned, if we don't self-  
20 identify, if our Veterans don't self-identify, we  
21 will have our healthcare facilities close. So, please  
22 stay on topic. The public should stick with that.

23           If you have a written statement or additional  
24 testimony you wish to submit for the record, please  
25

1  
2 provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at  
3 Arms.

4 So, I will now call our first panel: Jaclyn  
5 Kelly, from CUNY Graduate Center, thank you, Jaclyn,  
6 and thank you for that study. That's why we called  
7 this hearing, by the way.

8 JACLYN KELLY: Oh, great!

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: One of the reasons.

10 JACLYN KELLY: Are we good, audible? Good, thank  
11 you.

12 My name is Jaclyn Kelly, and I'm the Director  
13 of the New York City Labor Market Information Service  
14 and Applied Research Center at the CUNY Graduate  
15 Center. Thank you for having me and for holding this  
16 hearing.

17 I know that you all have had the opportunity to  
18 review the findings of the research up until now, and  
19 Commissioner Hendren also summarized some of the  
20 primary findings. So, I'd like to spend just a minute  
21 outlining the history of this work and next steps in  
22 the research, and then devote most of my time here to  
23 questions from you all that I can clarify or expand  
24 on.



1  
2 Okay, so this work began in 2023 with bringing  
3 together different stakeholders, which included the  
4 Department of Veteran Services, Syracuse University's  
5 D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military  
6 Families, the Student Veterans of America (SVA), as  
7 well as Polco, which is a veteran-owned polling firm.  
8 That was for idea scoping, thinking about the  
9 important questions we wanted to ask, and how to  
10 build on previous work that DVS had done.

11 We administered the survey in 2024, which was  
12 done by Polco, and then, in mid-2024, we finished  
13 data collection, and we moved on. LMIS managed the  
14 analysis.

15 Once we had the survey analysis in 2025, we  
16 convened a variety of different focus groups, some of  
17 which were different types of veterans. We also  
18 brought together mission-driven communications and  
19 marketing professionals, which it sounds like you  
20 could have been in the room, to understand what they  
21 thought about how we could take these findings and  
22 really use them to help lower non-identification and  
23 really bring folks in.

24 And then once we had those ideas, we took them  
25 to another focused group of Veteran-focused policy

1  
2 leaders. In mid-May, we convened a research breakfast  
3 for post-secondary folks, which Nicole Orlando  
4 mentioned, and some policy folks to hear if they  
5 thought these sounded viable in their environments.

6 Next steps are going to be feedback on these  
7 from non-identifying veterans that'll be a (TIMER)

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You're good.

9 JACLYN KELLY: Next set of factors...

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can go ahead.

11 JACLYN KELLY: Okay.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'm going to give you extra  
13 time for that.

14 JACLYN KELLY: All right.

15 The next step of this research is going to be  
16 convening another set of focus groups, really homing  
17 in on non-identifying Veterans, and saying to them,  
18 "Do these sound like policy proposals and practices  
19 that would bring you into the fold?"

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Now and again, I am  
21 going to mention this only because it's CUNY.

22 JACLYN KELLY: Yeah.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Because I came from CUNY.

24 JACLYN KELLY: Oh!

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I taught for 40-something  
3 years in graphic design. We had a Communications  
4 Department, where we worked with real companies, and  
5 my students were advanced students ready to go out  
6 into the industry. So I'd like you to maybe, if we  
7 could, there are many communication departments  
8 within CUNY, if you could partner with some of them –  
9 these are students that, what they get out of it if  
10 they design an ad campaign, a public service ad  
11 campaign, which everybody benefits from. The students  
12 get real-life work experience. That's why I did it  
13 when I was there. For the Bloomberg administration,  
14 we worked on campaigns and presented our designs at  
15 City Hall. I think this could be a project, coupled  
16 with CUNY, the Graduate Center, and the different  
17 campuses, there are many campuses that have graphic  
18 design, I think. Let's give it to some marketing  
19 departments within CUNY, or graphic design, and let's  
20 come up with a program. So I'm proposing that, and  
21 I'll try to help on my end. If you could actually  
22 spread the word, do you think that's a good idea?  
23 Anything we could do...

24 JACLYN KELLY: My ears really perked up when you  
25 were talking about the unused billboards, because we

1  
2 did, from the Marketing and Communications Focus  
3 Group, hear a lot of ideas about how to make  
4 messaging very direct to different kinds of veterans.  
5 And as Commissioner mentioned, really honoring and  
6 acknowledging that they have multiple identities. In  
7 their post-active service lives, their Veteran status  
8 is key, but it's not the only part of who they are...

9 (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and again, I think we  
11 -- I don't think we'd have come up with many hurdles  
12 in the industries, that means the billboard  
13 industries, which certainly want to be good  
14 neighbors, many are in neighborhoods, many of them  
15 are in commercial districts. We have kiosks that the  
16 City could help us with. But I think, almost like if  
17 you build it, they will come. So if we had, if we  
18 came up with a marketing plan, designed something,  
19 and then tried to sell it, I think it would be  
20 easier, because we could show the powers that be,  
21 whether it's marketing companies, whether it's the  
22 City itself, but say, here's what we have as an ad  
23 campaign, or here's what we have as a marketing plan,  
24 can we implement this without a budget? And that's

1  
2 the creativity here, and we've done it. We've done it  
3 in the past at CUNY, and we could still do it.

4 But I think when you mention Veterans to these  
5 companies, I think that they'll be more inclined to  
6 help out.

7 JACLYN KELLY: I think that's right. The people  
8 that we've spoken to are eager to share their  
9 expertise... (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, they want to help  
11 Veterans...

12 JACLYN KELLY: Right, they're just not sure how,  
13 you know? I think you get a lot of hesitation.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Go ahead, Council Member  
15 Paladino.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: We keep talking about  
17 funding, and understandably so. How about the private  
18 sector? Why aren't we hitting up these corporations  
19 for big money to help the Veterans, and why aren't  
20 they rolling out some sort of initiatives to hire  
21 Veterans? Because you know if you hire a Veteran,  
22 you're getting a top-notch worker, somebody who is  
23 regimented, works hard. And we don't see any kind of  
24 big rollouts even from our own City agencies. They  
25 should really try to go after the Veterans, the young

1  
2 Veterans, that served inactively, but did it for  
3 benefits and other reasons. And we've got major  
4 corporations right here in New York, and why not hit  
5 up them? Why not get money from them, and/or, have  
6 them roll out their own "Hire a Veteran" campaign.  
7 That's another way instead of leaning on government  
8 dollars all the time, as we seem to do, and when we  
9 lean on government dollars, whether they be state  
10 dollars or city dollars, we can't keep track of that  
11 money.

12 JACLYN KELLY: Hmm.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: But when you take it  
14 from a private sector, and you go directly to them,  
15 then we have, or the Commissioner will have, whoever  
16 -- direct contact with (sic).

17 And I think as far as our Veterans  
18 Administration goes here in the city, there should be  
19 a designated person, I'm sure there is, and, uh, to  
20 really make it that point, to go out after these.

21 I don't understand. We live in New York City.  
22 We live in New York State. This is where we should be  
23 getting our money from. I know as a council member,  
24 just to give you a quick example, one of my schools,  
25 their flags are decades old, for the classrooms. And

1  
2 their big flag that goes on their flagpole is also  
3 decades old and beat up. And they asked if I could  
4 supply them with flags. Well, I had to explain to  
5 people, because a lot of people seem to think a  
6 council member has a checkbook in their office where  
7 they can just very freely write a check, it's not the  
8 way it goes. You have to be fit into the budget some  
9 way, somehow. That, for me, is absolute nonsense, and  
10 it takes way too long. So, I am going to  
11 philanthropists, and I am saying to them, would you  
12 like to create, we'll create an event, and you buy  
13 this school their flags, whether it be on the  
14 flagpole, or every single classroom, and that's  
15 what's happening right now in my office today. And I  
16 feel that the Veterans Administration should go about  
17 this in the very same way. And maybe you'll see more  
18 Veterans start to self-identify. It's just a thought.

19 JACLYN KELLY: So, that would be like an ad  
20 campaign of a different type. It would be to really  
21 go to the private sector and say... (CROSS-TALK)

22 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Exactly right. Enough  
23 is enough with looking for government dollars.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, this...

25 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: They're not there...

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But, there are companies  
3 that do have, and I think...

4 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah...

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The Commissioner would  
6 mention this, or has mentioned it, there are  
7 companies that have a lot of programs for Veterans. I  
8 was speaking to Con Ed about, you know...

9 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yes, Con Ed is one.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Con Ed has a good  
11 program... (CROSS-TALK)

12 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yes, they do an  
13 excellent program... (CROSS-TALK)

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: for hiring Veterans. And  
15 many unions have the same thing. They have.. (CROSS-  
16 TALK)

17 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: It's not enough.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Apprenticeships for Vets --  
19 no, they do. They do. We did visit them. So, there  
20 are a lot, and... (CROSS-TALK)

21 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I'm talking about...  
22 (CROSS-TALK)

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We just have to tap into it  
24 and make sure that Veterans know about that.

25 JACLYN KELLY: Yes.



1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's the communication...

3 (CROSS-TALK)

4 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And that's where I'm  
5 talking about the money. You need money... (CROSS-  
6 TALK)

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: to put out  
9 communications. We're leaning on the City and the  
10 State to give us dollars to get the word out there. I  
11 think if it was more -- if it was done more with the  
12 private sector, and going to them for money, my own  
13 opinion, is that I think that that's a great way to  
14 get it going. We have iHeart Radio. iHeart Radio hits  
15 a huge (UNINTELLIGIBLE) of people. You know, why not  
16 donate time on iHeart Radio? It's just a thought: one  
17 medium, one form of media. iHeart Radio, that's big.  
18 It's huge in New York. It's huge across the country.  
19 But let's think, we gotta start to think outside the  
20 box. If we stay inside the box, it's not working.  
21 It's a proven fact that it's not working.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: So, just my...

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

25 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: You're welcome.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Council. Thank  
3 you -- go ahead, sorry.

4 JACLYN KELLY: There have been successful  
5 partnerships between big advertising in the private  
6 sector and city agencies for ad campaigns. And I  
7 wonder if that could be a possibility. Because when  
8 we did our focus group on mission-driven marketing  
9 concepts, they did get quite excited. We could see  
10 the wheels turning. And I wonder if there could be an  
11 opportunity to bring, as you mentioned, a capstone  
12 project for CUNY students and DVS, and then a private  
13 sector marketing firm, and to really showcase that as  
14 a way to get a marketing campaign... (CROSS-TALK)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, and just with the  
16 CUNY students, they do it as part of their  
17 curriculum.

18 JACLYN KELLY: Yeah, like a capstone. Yeah, like  
19 a professional final project... (CROSS-TALK)

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And they get to the real-  
21 life experience of presenting their ideas to a panel  
22 or to a few people, whatever it is. I used to bring  
23 students to City Hall, and they would present to  
24 council members and the Mayor's staff. Then we  
25 branched out into private industry. So we worked on

1  
2 real-life projects. The students get excited about  
3 that.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: They do.

5 JACLYN KELLY: Yeah.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: They are getting a taste of  
7 the industry. And they also get portfolio pieces.

8 JACLYN KELLY: Right.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And that's a wonderful --  
10 so, it's a win-win-win.

11 JACLYN KELLY: Right. Definitely.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Everybody wins on this. So,  
13 I would like to do that. I will coordinate with --  
14 again, I could talk to the chancellor's office, but I  
15 would like to have it done on campuses other than --  
16 I taught at New York City College of Technology,  
17 which has a robust graphic design and communications  
18 program. But I think there are so many other, uh,  
19 Queens Colleges, there's Hunter College. There are a  
20 bunch of units that have a robust graphic design  
21 program that I would think would participate in this.  
22 So, let's work on that, Commissioner could help, any  
23 time. But you can do it from the inside.

24 JACLYN KELLY: Yes.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: If you can.

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JACLYN KELLY: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much, thanks,  
thank you so much.

All right, I will call the next panel.

Thank you for your testimony and your good  
work.

JACLYN KELLY: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The next panel is Ryan  
Graham, Anthony Cibelli, and Rabah Belkebir.

Ryan, you go first, okay?

RYAN GRAHAM: I remember the last -- Oh, you  
could hear me. Last time, the Commissioner had to  
turn on my mic.

(LAUGHTER)

RYAN GRAHAM: But I'm going to do it John Rowan  
(phonetic) style, I don't really have testimony here.

Ryan Graham, I think most of you already know  
who I am. I wear too many hats. One of the primary  
ones is on the legislative front, at both the state  
and national levels. Well, she's not here any longer,  
but I do have to mention Councilwoman Won, with the  
Korean War Resolution. My uncle, my dad's brother,  
served in the Korean War, with the first CAV, he was  
a paratrooper. My dad also served, uh, just after the

1 war, along the DMZ, he was a military policeman in  
2 the US Air Force. I read through the Committee Report  
3 that was on the website, and it was pretty  
4 comprehensive, so thank you for putting it together.  
5 Particularly the portions related to internal related  
6 military issues, quote, "not having -- not proud of  
7 their service" unquote, and also having quote, "moved  
8 on" unquote. But I want to bring up the external  
9 issues, partially removed from military service  
10 itself, something I've noticed over the years. The  
11 breakdown in demographics ethnicity, gender,  
12 orientation, the dynamics of total socioeconomics  
13 demographics, age group - now this is where it gets  
14 interesting. So, I'm going to get down to the micro  
15 level. My home post is in Corona, I'm not from  
16 Corona, I'm actually from Joann's district. I grew up  
17 in Ozone Park. But the one thing I find interesting  
18 with the age group, I transferred in from the  
19 Woodside post, because they just aged out. I knew the  
20 prior post commander, a Korean War vet, he was a  
21 "M\*A\*S\*H" guy, so think of Alan Alda, the old show,  
22 Mike (INAUDIBLE), and the whole post was Italian  
23 American (TIMER).

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can go, you can go, go  
3 on.

4 RYAN GRAHAM: So, the one thing that I never  
5 knew about, I thought the Little Italy of Queens, my  
6 entire time growing up, was Howard Beach in Ozone  
7 Park. I never knew there was a ton of Italians in  
8 Corona, and I was like "What the hell's a Bocce Ball  
9 court doing... and the park across, and I kept  
10 hearing 'Spaghetti Park', I'm like what the hell is  
11 Spaghetti Park? Are you serious? But, one of the  
12 conversations that I had with Mike when I transferred  
13 in to replace him was that, Mike, we have to be  
14 honest, the demographics of this post are going to  
15 change. This area is primarily Central and South  
16 American, and he's like, "Where's the Vets at?" And I  
17 just told him, "They're here." Just the post-9/11  
18 generation, we have, I'm going to say between Corona  
19 and Jackson Heights, we have a couple of hundred  
20 within these neighborhoods alone. So sure as hell two  
21 years later, and just so you know, I'm like the  
22 number two recruiter for the VFW in New York State.  
23 So there's always like a joke like I can work at  
24 Major World or something just selling used cars,  
25 which we're not used cars, it's a great organization.

1  
2 But the majority of our makeup, we brought in 70 new  
3 members over the past two years. And I'm going to say  
4 about 50 to 60 of them are Hispanic, Colombian,  
5 Mexican, Salvadorian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, so  
6 that's just like the facts right there that I've  
7 seen. As far as age group, they're saying a lot of  
8 younger Vets are internally with an organization.  
9 older Vets, we're going to say primarily the Vietnam  
10 generation, they're like "Oh, where are the young  
11 vets at?" "When are they coming?" They're talking  
12 about post 9/11. And I try to talk to them and tell  
13 them, "Listen, think about what you did when you came  
14 home from Vietnam. You worked on your family and your  
15 work." That was your primary thing, and it wasn't  
16 exactly a popular war, as we know. So there was  
17 another dynamic there. But I got to constantly tell  
18 them, like listen, a lot of veterans are getting out,  
19 they're going to school, whether CUNY, SUNY, private,  
20 St. John's, maybe Syracuse, families, school. But the  
21 one thing I'm noticing, we're having, and they're  
22 pretty active, just at the micro level at my post,  
23 I'm going to say mid-30s to well into their 40s. So  
24 we're talking GWAT-One, I'm within that range, I'd  
25 say now we're like middle-aged. I enlisted right

1  
2 after 9/11. And where they have become -- I guess  
3 they're a little bit more settled in life, their kids  
4 are growing older, there's really no school, they're  
5 done with school, they have their degrees, I have my  
6 degrees. So, now they have more time to participate  
7 in local VSO events and local events in general. I'm  
8 sorry, I'm going way beyond two minutes. Chairman,  
9 you already know me.

10 But, speaking about marketing, push-pull  
11 strategies, and I have said this time and time again,  
12 I think the Commissioner and DVS they've done a  
13 fantastic job with the budget with the manpower that  
14 they've had. And, honestly, I know certain people who  
15 probably complain that the information doesn't get  
16 out there. And I've seen in every single week at  
17 least once a week, I get an email from DVS, with  
18 everything that's going on, generally within the  
19 Military and Veterans' community. Generally, also  
20 within New York City. And social media, that's a big  
21 one, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn. The information  
22 gets out there.

23 One of the things, it was mentioned in a report  
24 in the Council report, quote, "Not have resources to  
25 perform all seven touches." Unquote. That's a fact



1  
2 right there. We know that DVS, you look at the total  
3 City budget, some agencies are well into the  
4 billions, and DVS is at only \$5 million. So, there is  
5 only so much they can do. We do have to give it to  
6 them. They really get out there and do what they need  
7 to do. So, that's the push strategy.

8         Now, as far as the pull strategy, and this is  
9 something that I got to give it to the Commissioner  
10 and the staff at DVS, is that they have been  
11 utilizing partnerships, really getting out there with  
12 VSOs for localized initiatives, also, even outside of  
13 New York City, IVMF, up at Syracuse University. It's  
14 a great program. I'm a Syracuse alum, and I've seen  
15 it firsthand. If anybody has ever gone -- if you  
16 haven't gone to Syracuse University, go check out the  
17 NVRC up there. This place is like the size of a city  
18 block. And they have so many initiatives that really  
19 come out of there.

20         I am going to cut it short, but one of the  
21 things, one of the programs that I don't want to  
22 bring up, and it's related between DVS, the City  
23 Council, which, thank you, because I know this has  
24 been a big effort, and we're sort of like a startup  
25 now. And it's sort of in its first phase. So, I can't

1  
2 remember the name. I know the Commissioner mentioned  
3 it earlier, and I am always going to call the Paul  
4 Valone Veterans' Initiative. The one thing I find  
5 interesting, I've visited since Thursday, about dozen  
6 different council officer, some we have already  
7 started working with, I know Council Member Ariola,  
8 Bob, Vickie, I know one of our service officers, to  
9 do intake, to do claims, up in the Bronx, at Council  
10 Member Marmorato's office. This is something that's  
11 important. It's really getting down there into the  
12 districts themselves. Something I -- and I'll just  
13 leave it at this, just really getting down to the  
14 smaller demographics, and not just the council  
15 districts, but the community boards, the precinct  
16 community councils, really just getting deep down  
17 into the communities. I probably said it before, I  
18 actually learned of Civics off of one of the council  
19 members here, when I sat on CB 10. She was very  
20 vocal, and I joined the community board, mainly  
21 because there were issues within the community that I  
22 didn't know about, and I learned a lot from Council  
23 Member Ariola, who was on the board with me at the  
24 time. The Chairwoman, Betty Branton (phonetic). So I  
25 learned a lot from that. And one of the reasons that

1  
2 brought me in was that there were issues within the  
3 community. And I was like, you know, let me join the  
4 community board. Precinct Community is my post. We  
5 host the 110 Precinct Community Council. And you  
6 learn a lot. But I think that is really where  
7 Veterans will honestly get more involved, so that  
8 they will self-identify.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it's getting the word  
10 out. But, that's, thank you, Ryan, thanks so much.

11 Anthony, go ahead.

12 ANTHONY CIBELLI: I thought the topic...

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You have to, the mic...

14 ANTHONY CIBELLI: I wasn't fully aware. I  
15 checked out the website about what the topic was, or  
16 with DVS. I don't want to poop on any parades today,  
17 but talking about Veterans disclosing their status or  
18 encouraging them to do more, I think that people also  
19 need to know the risks and the reality in New York  
20 City, and the fact that elected officials and  
21 investigatory bureaus really don't do anything to  
22 help with people's complaints.

23 So, I am going to spare you from what I had  
24 written. I actually copied a social media post that I  
25 had written the other day when I found out about

1  
2 this. And then I will have some suggestions that do  
3 intersect with my experience, and how we can also  
4 utilize brave Veterans. Because Veterans are mainly  
5 known for bravery and courage, right, and their honor  
6 and service. So, a lot of the issues that have not  
7 been acknowledged at all by elected officials,  
8 perhaps we could actually utilize the Veterans route  
9 to help implement those things, because Veterans are  
10 definitely effective.

11           So, I will begin now, Sir.

12           What's really behind the curtain as to why the  
13 City of New York is so interested in Veterans  
14 disclosing their status? Let's be honest, New York  
15 City truly wouldn't care about something like this  
16 unless there were a funding formula, data incentive,  
17 or some benevolent PR boost attached to it. So, is  
18 this really about helping veterans, or is it about  
19 helping agencies and their well-protected, unionized  
20 workforce getting to say they "served" us, or worse,  
21 getting to report on how they "dealt" with us? At the  
22 same time, their accounts are typically laden with  
23 some false statements and fabricated claims that are  
24 then given great deference and credibility. This is  
25 the status quo. So, what is NYC really up to this

1  
2 time? More efficiency? More "services"? And once you  
3 get us to check that box or a municipal worker does  
4 it, what happens next? From what I've seen and lived,  
5 disclosing Veteran status can become a liability, not  
6 a protection. (TIMER) It's like putting a target...  
7 May I continue?

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, go ahead.

9 ANTHONY CIBELLI: It's like putting a target on  
10 your back and handing the City a roadmap for how to  
11 exploit you, with no recourse. After all, nothing  
12 says "thank you for your service" quite like being  
13 flagged as unstable, labeled "bizarre," intentionally  
14 misrepresented in official documents by those with  
15 immunity, and locked in a jail cells, psych ward, or  
16 kept away from your children, all so someone else can  
17 check a box, open or close a case, or collect and  
18 disburse some form of funding.

19 That is not only my entire experience. It is  
20 many other people's experiences.

21 So, where this intersects with other people in  
22 New York City, as I talked about earlier, we could  
23 initiate Veterans' committees to help acknowledge  
24 these issues. We already have body cameras on police;  
25 we also need them on child protective workers. The

1  
2 rhetoric against the police, people may agree with it  
3 or disagree with it, but at least it has some sort of  
4 status and is publicized. There is negative attention  
5 of the size and controlled narratives of stakeholder  
6 organizations that joined the state with what the  
7 problems are in a lot of these systems. So, I think  
8 we have to do better. I have tried with the Assembly  
9 and the Senate, I knew City Council couldn't do it,  
10 to implement body cameras across the state and also  
11 locally here on ACS. Nobody is interested at all  
12 whatsoever.

13       Also, there needs to be some sort of reviewing  
14 policies and procedures of ACS and complaint  
15 procedures, a process to ensure that there are actual  
16 investigations into them. Currently, there is a bill,  
17 sponsored by Andrew Hevesi, called A.8248. It is  
18 totally a good thing, what the legislation says, but  
19 the press that it has been getting is totally  
20 deceptive and misleading, and it actually takes away  
21 from what it is intended for. And it also puts the  
22 focus, this narrative, on only investigating when  
23 children die, but nothing for the living. You go to  
24 the Department of Investigations to report that ACS  
25 is lying against you, and you can easily prove it.

1  
2 You claim that you're in the act of committing  
3 offenses that have been done and adjudicated many  
4 long years ago - many things. They won't do anything,  
5 and then you'll find out that ACS has noted in their  
6 case files that you told the DOI something different.  
7 I don't know who is to blame for that, but it is very  
8 dangerous, and it is not only happening to Veterans.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, Anthony, this is  
10 a little off topic for the Veterans, uh...

11 ANTHONY CIBELLI: Well, here's the thing. You're  
12 celebrating this and encouraging people to disclose  
13 it. You even said a little bit ago that we should be  
14 able to acknowledge the Veterans for their service,  
15 because they did more than other communities. But,  
16 the fact that we are getting these things overlooked,  
17 and I actually have to volunteer my time here  
18 today...

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, I appreciate...

20 ANTHONY CIBELLI: (INAUDIBLE)

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But this Committee is  
22 trying to get Veterans to self-identify. And that's  
23 the topic.

24 ANTHONY CIBELLI: Yes, well, I'll...  
25

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Not ACS. That's a different  
3 committee.

4 ANTHONY CIBELLI: No, no, no, well, I'll just  
5 say that...

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's a different committee.

7 ANTHONY CIBELLI: When you... When you disclose  
8 your Veteran status in New York City, you should  
9 really err on the side of caution. Because it...

10 (CROSS-TALK)

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, I wouldn't... That's  
12 counterproductive.

13 ANTHONY CIBELLI: No, no, no, well, no...

14 (CROSS-TALK)

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Because we already... We  
16 already talked about the healthcare situation for  
17 Veterans, that we can close hospitals because there  
18 are not that many Veterans... (CROSS-TALK)

19 ANTHONY CIBELLI: Well, that sounds like a snuff  
20 premise, Sir. But I appreciate it. Thank you.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: All right, enough.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, thank you,  
23 Athony.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Okay, okay, that's it.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wrap up.



1  
2 RABAH BELKEBIR: Hello, everybody, before I  
3 start, I want to thank Phylis from Council Member  
4 Avilés, Danny from Council Member Holden, and Michael  
5 from the DVS, before I started.

6 My name is Rabah Belkebir, and I'm a proud  
7 member of the Board of NYS Disabled Veterans. Vendors  
8 operating statewide under NYS General Business Law 32  
9 to 35-A.

10 For the past 25 years, we've come to this very  
11 committee, over and over, asking elected officials to  
12 help us stop the ongoing discrimination against our  
13 community. And for 25 years, we have received only  
14 words. Only the same "Thank you for your service" and  
15 a few nice speeches on Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

16 But when it comes to real action, real support,  
17 we are ignored. Let's be honest: if you're not going  
18 to help us, just say it. We're used to that. We're  
19 veterans, we've experienced worse. On the  
20 battlefield, we learned to count on ourselves. And  
21 today, in our city, we still have to fight alone. We  
22 have to fight alone.

23 We have state-granted rights, but City  
24 politicians ignore them, and City agencies violate  
25 them every day. I won't name names, but the truth is,

1  
2 we've been pushed aside for far too long. In the  
3 world of street vending, New York City respects and  
4 protects illegal vendors more than service-connected  
5 disabled veterans. It's a disgrace. We've seen  
6 illegal migrants and non-veteran vendors given more  
7 rights and more protection (TIMER) than Veterans who  
8 served this country and paid the price.

9       Do you know that disabled Veteran vendors  
10 receive more summonses than illegal vendors every  
11 day? In midtown, there are only two legal Veteran  
12 vendors, me and Armando. And yet, we're the only ones  
13 constantly harassed and chased away. Illegal vendors  
14 operate freely and even receive backing from  
15 organizations like the Street Vendor Project, an  
16 organization funded by the City itself.

17       Let me tell you: their leader. Mohamed Attia  
18 committed forgery to obtain a yellow license, a  
19 license legally reserved for service-connected  
20 disabled veterans. And no one has held him  
21 accountable. Even the OATH Department, which is  
22 supposed to be fair, treats non-veterans and illegal  
23 vendors better than Disabled Veterans. If a non-  
24 veteran gets a summons, they go to the Street Vendor  
25

1  
2 Project, and it gets dismissed or reduced. But if  
3 you're a Disabled Veteran, you're ignored.

4 I exchanged emails with OATH leadership, trying  
5 to explain that some of us live with PTSD, and that  
6 their process adds more stress to already struggling  
7 veterans. Their answer? "We respect you. Thank you  
8 for your service." They then refer me to a  
9 representative, who ultimately only helps us schedule  
10 a new hearing. That's all. That's the "assistance" we  
11 will get as Disabled Veterans.

12 Meanwhile, illegal vendors, I heard myself,  
13 someone told me, if you want to get your rights,  
14 don't even tell them that you are a Disabled Veteran.  
15 That was told to me. I speak Arabic, so they trusted  
16 me, and they told me what was going on. This is what  
17 is said.

18 And that's the harsh reality: in this city,  
19 being a Veteran feels like a liability, not an honor.  
20 To the members of this Veterans Committee, we're not  
21 asking you to give us special treatment. We're simply  
22 asking you to do your job. This is the most honorable  
23 Committee in the City Council – or it should be.  
24 Acknowledge that New York State is violating state  
25 law every single day by ignoring service-connected

1  
2 Disabled Veterans and protecting 30,000 street  
3 vendors who operate outside the law. We are only 200.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, thank you,  
5 Rabah. We have to move on. Thank you... (CROSS-TALK)

6 RABAH BELKEBIR: Just one thing. We made  
7 sacrifices for this country. We have state-legislated  
8 rights. And we deserve more than empty words.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: (INAUDIBLE)

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, that's good. That's all  
11 right, that's all right. Thank you so much, Rabah. We  
12 are in your corner. And what you said was very true.  
13 We won't give up, and neither will you. Thank you so  
14 much.

15 All right, next panel, Timothy Pena and  
16 Christopher Leon Johnson.

17 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: (INAUDIBLE)

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, you can go, go ahead.  
19 Hello, hello, my name is Christopher Leon  
20 Johnson, and I'm here to speak in support of Julie  
21 Won's resolution to designate the Korean War Veterans  
22 Day. That war is an unrespected (sic) war. I believe  
23 that all wars should be respected. All wars should be  
24 honored, but the Korean War is a real disrespected  
25 war by this country, especially the city of New York,

1  
2 my adopted father, who was a Freemason. Willie  
3 Bennett fought in that war, and he died of a heart  
4 attack. And I want to make it clear that I hope that  
5 the City Council unanimously votes in favor of that  
6 bill, of that resolution. And they need to put like a  
7 (UNINTELLIGIBLE) outside that park in City Hall Park,  
8 like on one of the stools, like one of the benches.  
9 So when people sit down, they have a keen eye that  
10 allows them to see what's going on here.

11 Now, back to... Now, going with this self-  
12 identification of Veterans, let's make this clear  
13 that I think that this concept of Veterans  
14 identifications (sic) is nothing but a setup by the  
15 City Council to weaponize these nonprofits, to say,  
16 like oh, if you identify yourself as a Veteran, they  
17 can justify getting more money from the City budget,  
18 because they got Veterans in the Committee for  
19 quotas. Not only that, this helps out these  
20 nonprofits and getting more money from foundations  
21 like the Brooklyn Organization and the Ford  
22 Foundation for Veterans. And I think it doesn't do  
23 any justice, like, what this guy said about the  
24 Veterans, yeah, that nonprofit, they do certain  
25 things to really undermine Veterans when it comes to

1 street vending. They only help out these migrants,  
2 migrant vendors, but then they want to cry about like  
3 why there's so many anti-migrant rhetoric, because  
4 you help more of these migrants, and some of them --  
5 most of them are illegal. And you can't -- they can't  
6 get mad when there's a lot of anti-migrant rhetoric  
7 in the city of New York, because when you help out  
8 the migrants, more than more migrants than Veterans,  
9 you can't get mad about the rhetoric. You know what  
10 I'm saying? (TIMER) It's really unfair that these  
11 Veterans get treated like dirt when it comes to  
12 street vending, and while the migrants get elevated  
13 like they're kings and queens. And it's really wrong.  
14 I am not anti-migrant, I love my migrants, but at the  
15 same time, you have to put these Veterans first,  
16 because they fought for this country. They didn't  
17 come over to this -- they didn't, they didn't come  
18 over to this country and expect a handout. Because  
19 this is what's going on here. They come over to this  
20 country, they expect a handout, and they get catered  
21 to because you got a Mayor, and you got a city  
22 council, like that Council Member that's over there,  
23 Sandy Nurse, not you, not Kristy, but like Sandy  
24 Nurse, that loves illegal immigrants more than --  
25

1  
2 illegal violent, illegal immigrants more than the  
3 Veterans. And like I said before, I know that this  
4 might be a topic, like I said, I am calling on this  
5 committee to vote out Sandy Nurse. She need to be  
6 voted out this Committee. Because she has done  
7 nothing for this Committee. Let me go -- she had  
8 done nothing for this Committee, she does not care  
9 about Veterans at all. Let's keep that real. People  
10 need to start saying that here, that -- that lady,  
11 that she does not care about Veterans. She only care  
12 about illegal immigrants. She only care about thugs.  
13 she only care about Criminals. She only care about  
14 pedophiles, she only care about sex predators. That's  
15 all she care about. Okay? She need to be removed of  
16 this Committee, because she is the biggest anchor of  
17 this Committee. Take her out and put in, like, Erik  
18 Bottcher or someone like that, or someone that at  
19 least can give a damn.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, thank you.

21 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: You know what I mean?  
22 So, thank you so much.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Chris.

24 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Timothy?

1

TIMOTHY PENA: (INAUDIBLE)

2

3

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Put the mic -- Thank you.

4

TIMOTHY PENA: Uhm, okay.

5

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Go ahead.

6

(PAUSE)

7

TIMOTHY PENA: Thank you for staying.

8

UNKNOWN: I'm sorry. (INAUDIBLE)

9

TIMOTHY PENA: Thank you for coming.

10

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, just so...

11

Timothy, Timothy, address the Chair. Address the

12

Chair, okay?

13

TIMOTHY PENA: Got to...

14

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

15

TIMOTHY PENA: Got to love the way that --

16

that's nice, that's nice, mass exits...

17

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't think it was

18

personal. So, go ahead.

19

TIMOTHY PENA: I believe it is.

20

UNKNOWN: We have other hearings. (INAUDIBLE)

21

hearings.

22

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes. Yes, they have other

23

hearings, thank you. Go ahead, Timothy.

24

TIMOTHY PENA: Well, despite that, thank you for

25

the opportunity to speak today. My name is Timothy



1  
2 Pena, and I run an organization called Veterans  
3 Justice Project; I work with incarcerated and  
4 homeless Veterans. I am also responding to the issue  
5 of self-identification.

6       The fact of the matter is that you're trying to  
7 sell us or calling self-identification a duty. You  
8 have to give us something. Despite nearly \$4 million  
9 a year in federal funding, Department of Homeless  
10 Services enrolls only 75% of VA-eligible Veterans,  
11 and often transfers others to violent shelters as  
12 punishment for speaking out. In contrast, Samaritan  
13 Daytop, which receives no VA funding, has a 70%  
14 successful exit rate. Compare that to Borden Avenue,  
15 which gets nearly \$4 million a year of VA funding,  
16 with only a 60% successful exit. Twenty percent of  
17 them disappear, and we never hear from them again.

18       This is one of the reasons why we don't self-  
19 identify. Why would we? The Borden Avenue conditions  
20 are appalling, violence, drug use, unsanitary  
21 bathrooms, a leaking roof for 10 years, (TIMER) and  
22 no meaning for engagement. Even worse, Borden  
23 operates as a MICA shelter, which is mental illness  
24 and chemical abuse. I am not a MICA Veteran. I am  
25 service-connected for PTSD, I do my mental health, I

1  
2 take care of myself. I don't need to be in a shelter  
3 with other Veterans just because of the broad range  
4 of Veterans. Caseworkers often lack proper training  
5 and undermine progress with criticism rather than  
6 support. Veterans who have earned federal benefits  
7 are being pushed aside, while the City prioritizes  
8 those with no VA eligibility. I am treated just as  
9 poorly as somebody with a bad conduct discharge who  
10 is a violent sex offender. They're not taken out of  
11 the shelters because of the MICA. It isn't about have  
12 and have not, it's about honoring service. We need  
13 oversight, we need accountability, and we need to  
14 shift away from this broken service that lumps us all  
15 together, which is exactly why we don't, I believe,  
16 self-identify.

17 I was also at the breakfast, and one thing that  
18 hasn't been discussed is the suggestion from Veterans  
19 to self-identify and come out. And a lot of the  
20 suggestions are the exact same things that I have  
21 been proposing to this same Committee for two years:  
22 Establish a Navigator Program; utilize the Veterans  
23 who are students and pair them with peer-to-peer, but  
24 as mentorships separate them from navigators. In  
25 other words, don't have the same person that is there

1  
2 as a mentor be the one who is supposed to get you to  
3 the Department of Veteran Services or Department of  
4 Motor Vehicles to get your license. We need to  
5 establish a solid line between the mentor part of it  
6 and the logistical part of Veterans in transition.

7 Another suggestion was to provide tangible  
8 information that we can utilize. I have been working  
9 on a resource guide for two years. And I have gotten  
10 not one single bit of encouragement from anyone.  
11 And I ask why, why are we dismissing the Veterans who  
12 are coming here? And the reason for all of the empty  
13 seats is because we are not being heard. We are not  
14 being appreciated. And then we are being lumped in  
15 with Veterans who have not earned, through service or  
16 honorable discharge, that I have. So, that's it.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, thank you,  
18 Timothy, thanks so much.

19 That concludes the in person portion of our  
20 public testimony. We will now move to remote  
21 testimony. If you are testifying remotely, please  
22 listen for your name to be called. Once your name is  
23 called, a member of our staff will unmute you, and  
24 you may then start your testimony once the Sergeant  
25 at Arms sets the clock and cues you to begin.

1  
2 So our first and only Zoom participant is  
3 Ashton Stewart. Are you there?

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

5 ASHTON STEWART: I am.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

7 ASHTON STEWART: Hi. Hi, everybody, thank you,  
8 Chair Holden, and Members of the Committee on  
9 Veterans. I am Ashton Stewart, I am a Gulf War Vet, I  
10 am the MJHS Veterans Program Manager, and I'm also a  
11 member of the Veteran Advisory Board and the Board of  
12 Visitors at Saint Albans.

13 The need to better equip clinicians is  
14 staggering. A 2018 study by the Rand Corporation  
15 found that less than 3% of public and private  
16 providers in New York are qualified or competent to  
17 work with the veteran population.

18 MJHS, as a health provider, stands in a  
19 different world because we're not a Veteran  
20 organization, so we have a better way of addressing  
21 the gap in self-identification of Veterans. The State  
22 Department of Veterans Services is working with us  
23 and has turned to us to help update a VA pocket card  
24 to help clinicians improve their numbers of self-  
25 identification.

1  
2           One of the ways that we've made a big change in  
3 our agency is with a military assessment, which as  
4 Commissioner Hendon pointed out earlier, is so  
5 important to lead with, "Did you serve?", because the  
6 identity of as a Veteran, including myself for a long  
7 time, is not something that I really accepted. And  
8 there's personal conflict, and also, as the  
9 Commissioner mentioned, there's different parts of  
10 our lives that are unique. So even as a Veteran, we  
11 all have a different story. We all have individual  
12 experiences, whether we've experienced trauma or are  
13 victims of military sexual trauma; we have seen too  
14 much war, or were asked to do things that we wouldn't  
15 normally have done. There are a lot services and  
16 programs out there to support the needs of everyone  
17 who has served.

18           So, getting the assessment in place, at every  
19 institution across the board to ask the question,  
20 "Did you serve?" and then get the pertinent  
21 information to determine eligibility, "Where did you  
22 serve?" "How long did you serve?" And then the open-  
23 ended question, "Do you want to talk about your  
24 experience?" That is key. (TIMER) Because getting the  
25 trust from the Veteran is...

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SERGEANT AT ARMS: You time has expired.

ASHTON STEWART: also incredibly important.

Did I run out of time?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can finish, go ahead.

ASHTON STEWART: Okay, thank you so much, Chair Holden.

We have been able to connect with Veterans in a special way, even at the late stage of life. For our hospice patients, we are able to empower them with the information and resources that are available to them. We've enrolled them in the VA for the first time, oftentimes. And we've been able to get them additional home health aide hours, uh, empower them with information about burial for them and their spouse in a national cemetery, which is available to anyone who doesn't have a dishonorable discharge.

Also, the clarification with our staff about the difference between "other than honorable" and punitive types of discharges like "dishonorable" and "court martial" are also crucial to know, because they can still get services. Even with a punitive discharge, there is still a way to access Veteran services.

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2           The point is that we need a better outcome with  
3 self-identification. And the way to do is to  
4 implement the military assessments. I'm happy to  
5 share the one we have.

6           We also put together a Veteran Resource Guide  
7 that outlines most of the benefits available to  
8 veterans through the lens of Aging Veterans that we  
9 share when we go out and present. It's on our website  
10 or it will be on our website. We have printed copies  
11 that I take out when I'm engaging with the community.  
12 We also have the Vet to Vet Café, which a quarterly  
13 program that you're familiar with. We've highlighted  
14 the power of music therapy once. We talked about  
15 medical nexus letters. The last one we held was in  
16 Brooklyn, focusing on the power of community, sharing  
17 the history of Veterans, and also talking about our  
18 own stories to add to the story that we are sharing.

19           Every individual has a story to tell, and we  
20 want to provide a safe platform for Veterans to feel  
21 comfortable to share those stories to overcome a lot  
22 of the mental health challenges that Veterans are  
23 facing – which is an obstacle to getting them access  
24 to the benefits their eligible for.

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2 I'd be happy to go on about this for hours,  
3 honestly, Chair Holden, but I will pause here. Thank  
4 you so much for the opportunity... (CROSS-TALK)

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, thank you, Ashton.  
6 Thank you for your valuable testimony. Let's talk  
7 some more about this. I thank you for your wonderful  
8 suggestions and for sharing. Your experience is  
9 wonderful. Thank you so much for waiting around, too,  
10 thank you.

11 So, we have two names that have signed up,  
12 Armando Rodriguez and you with us?

13 (NO RESPONSE)

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alex Stein?

15 (NO RESPONSE)

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No?

17 So, hearing none, if anyone is present in the  
18 room that has not had the opportunity to testify who  
19 wishes to do so, please raise your hand or somebody  
20 come over. No?

21 All right, thank you so much. Thank you to  
22 everyone who participated. Thank you, Sergeants.  
23 Thank you everybody. We had another good hearing.  
24 Thanks so much, and this hearing is adjourned.



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 no interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date July 12, 2025