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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

September 17, 2019  
Start: 10:07 a.m.  
Recess: 12:20 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway-Committee Rm, 16<sup>th</sup> Fl.

B E F O R E: CHAIM M. DEUTSCH  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:  
ALICKA AMPRY-SAMUEL  
MATHIEU EUGENE  
ALAN N. MAISEL  
PAUL A. VALLONE

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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

- Adam Connolly  
Assistant Commissioner for Engagement and  
Community Services at the New York City  
Department of Veteran Services, DVS
- Alexis Wichowski  
Associate Commissioner of Public Affairs at the  
New York City Department of Veteran Services, DVS
- Mary Bier  
National Director of Military Initiatives at  
Unite Us
- Maureen Casey  
Chief Operating Officer for the Institute for  
Veterans and Military Families, IVMF
- Juan Serrano  
Assistant Vice President for Military and Veteran  
Liaison Services for Northwell Health
- Anthony Silvera  
Supervisor of Vet Connect NYC
- Coco Culhane  
Founder and Director of the Veterans Advocacy  
Project
- Kent Eiler  
Project Director at the City Bar Justice Center's  
Veterans Assistance Project, VAP
- John Rowan  
National President of Vietnam Veterans of America
- Joe Hunt  
Director of the Veteran Mental Health Coalition
- Vadim Panasyuk  
Senior Manager of Client Services with IAVA Rapid  
Response Referral Program, RRRP
- Rhonda Sherwin  
Former Veterans Financial Coach at Vet Connect  
NYC

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

Matthew Ryba  
Outreach and Education Director for New York  
Presbyterian's Military Family Wellness Center

Joseph Euro  
Psychologist at the New York City Department of  
Veteran Affairs' VISN 2, Mental Illness Research,  
Education and Clinical Center, MIRECC

[gavel]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Good morning, I'm Council Member Chaim Deutsch, Chair of the Committee on Veterans, thank you all for joining us today. I would like to thank the members of the armed forces that protect our way of living and all of the freedoms that we are afforded. I would also like to thank the veterans and military members who have supported the military community and our country. At today's hearing we'll be discussing about Connect NYC, a program operated by the New York City Department of Veterans Services. A common issue we see among the veteran community is a lack of knowledge about as well as access to services and providers. In response to this deficit DVS created the vet Connect NYC program to ensure that veteran needs are matched with service, services and providers. Vet Connect NYC began as a pilot program in 2015 called NY Services NYC. New York Serves was created to find an effective, accessible model for streamlining the complex process of navigating all the available resources for veterans in New York City. In November of 2018, DVS officially acquired the former NY Serves and launched Vet Connect NYC in

1  
2 its place. Vet Connect NYC is a referral-based  
3 platform for veterans to search for and be connected  
4 with the services that are available for them here in  
5 New York City. The platform is run by DVS in  
6 partnership with Syracuse, a university, university  
7 institute for veterans and military families, America  
8 Serves, Unite US and Northwell Health. Vet Connect  
9 NYC has connections with hosts of over 80 providers  
10 of services including providers, providers like  
11 American Red Cross, Cross, CUNY, Four Block, the  
12 Bridge and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.  
13 These providers offer a range of services including  
14 legal assistance, health care, employment, housing  
15 and many other services. The providers are available  
16 on Vet Connect's website and Vet Connect positions  
17 itself as a referral program to connect veterans to  
18 those providers. Although Vet Connect NYC has been in  
19 existence only one year since it's official launch,  
20 the framework that this platform is built on and has  
21 been active since 2015 under it's former name NYC  
22 Serves NYC. We look forward to learning more about  
23 Vet Connect NYC today including how its being run,  
24 how the referral serves portion works and what  
25 difference... what differences exist between NY Serves

1  
2 and the current Vet Connect program. I would like to  
3 thank committee staff Nuzhat Chowdhury our Counsel;  
4 Kevin Kotowski our Policy Analyst and Andrew Wilber  
5 our Finance Analyst and my new citywide Veterans  
6 Director Mr. Joe Bello for their help in putting  
7 together this hearing so, I want to congratulate Joe  
8 Bello once again for being on the New York City  
9 Council's team and serving as the citywide Veterans  
10 Director so I will let everyone give him a nice round  
11 of applause.

12 [applause]

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, at this time  
14 I'd like to recognize the members who are here is  
15 Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel and Council Member  
16 Paul Vallone and I'd like to ask now the Counsel to  
17 administer the oath.

18 COMMITTEE CLERK: Please raise your right  
19 hand? Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole  
20 truth and nothing but the truth in your testimony  
21 before this committee and to respond honestly to  
22 Council Member questions?

23 [panel affirms]

24 ADAM CONNOLLY: Good morning Chair  
25 Deutsch and members of the Committee on Veterans. My

1 name is Adam Connolly and I am proud to serve as the  
2 Assistant Commissioner for Engagement and Community  
3 Services at the New York City Department of Veteran  
4 Services. I am joined today by Alexis Wichowski,  
5 Associate Commissioner for Public Affairs at DVS. On  
6 behalf of Commissioner Loree Sutton and DVS we would  
7 like to extend our appreciation to the Committee on  
8 Veterans for their advocacy and leadership in the  
9 veteran's community in New York City. DVS's  
10 engagement of community service members have been  
11 proud to greet members of the City Council including  
12 Chair Deutsch at our veterans resource centers  
13 throughout the city and hope they will have  
14 additional opportunities to introduce members of the  
15 Council to our local veterans at the veteran resource  
16 centers and other events in the future. About Vet  
17 Connect NYC. I would like to now address the subject  
18 of this hearing, the coordinated care network that  
19 connect NYC. That Connect NYC is a one stop shop for  
20 New York City service members, veterans and their  
21 families to connect to a range of free, vetted,  
22 quality resource... services and only those services  
23 for which they are deemed eligible, it's what we in  
24 the military community like to call a force  
25

1 multiplier. With a single phone call or by filling  
2 out a brief intake form, Vet Connect NYC links  
3 service members, veterans and their families to a  
4 network of, of over 100 service providers capable of  
5 addressing the range of life needs. Vet Connect NYC  
6 is a partnership with the city of New York who  
7 procured the network and Syracuse University's  
8 Institute for Veterans and military families, IVMF  
9 who coordinates the subcontractors of which there are  
10 two; Unite Us, a veteran owned tech company who  
11 operates the digital platform and Northwell Health  
12 who serve as the coordination center providing  
13 trained veteran pure specialists who work one on one  
14 with constituents. How it works. In a moment we will  
15 present a demonstration of how a person could submit  
16 an assistance request to that Connect NYC. I'll also  
17 provide a brief summary of the process, discuss how  
18 Vet Connect NYC has performed since we launched in  
19 November of 2018 and provide some key metrics that  
20 reveal insights about the complexity of needs New  
21 York City service members, veterans and their  
22 families have met through this program. Signing up  
23 for Vet Connect NYC is simple and straightforward;  
24 you can call 1-833-VETSNYC, you can go to the  
25

1 website, [www dot Vet Connect NYC dot org](http://www.VetConnectNYC.org) from a  
2 computer or mobile phone or you can speak with one of  
3 DVS's outreach coordinators who will assist you in  
4 signing up. After filling out a few basic demographic  
5 questions you will receive a phone call from a  
6 coordinated care manager within three to five  
7 business days. For urgent mental health needs Vet  
8 Connect NYC also promptly displays the phone number  
9 for the veteran's crisis line. All of the care  
10 managers are also veterans working at our coordinated  
11 care provider, Northwell Health, one of the largest  
12 health care providers in the Northeast. The care  
13 managers will ask questions designed to pinpoint what  
14 kinds of services you're eligible for as well as what  
15 needs you have. As the data will show most callers  
16 have more than one need. If you're seeking housing,  
17 you may also need help finding a job and be  
18 interested in speaking with a mentor for example. The  
19 care manager then inputs relevant details from the  
20 conversation into an advanced technology platform  
21 operated by the veteran owned tech business, Unite  
22 Us. This technology platform visible only to  
23 Northwell Health and the target service providers  
24 allows the care managers to track which service  
25

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2 providers the caller is eligible for, make the  
3 referral electronically, track when the service  
4 provider successfully connects the caller to services  
5 and confirm when the case is conclusively resolved.

6 If the case is not successfully resolved with the  
7 first person... service provider referral Northwell  
8 Health's care managers can then conduct, follow up  
9 calls and emails with the client until an appropriate  
10 service provider is matched with the case. If a  
11 constituent needs a service that is not available  
12 within the vetted provider network of Vet Connect NYC  
13 Northwell Health's care managers can also make a  
14 referral to an out of network organization. The  
15 vetting process to become a member of the network  
16 includes consideration of several areas such as need  
17 for services within the network, mission, vision and  
18 service of the provider, staff capacity and  
19 willingness to adhere to the referral model, the  
20 service providers finance and budgeting, aquadations,  
21 references from other providers and a demonstrated  
22 focus on data, measurement and commitment to  
23 improvement. In sum, the service providers within the  
24 Vet Connect NYC network go through a thorough vetting  
25 process. The main benefit of Vet Connect NYC is of

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2 course what it provides for service members, veterans  
3 and family members. It's very easy to connect to Vet  
4 Connect NYC and very difficult to fall through the  
5 cracks. Once in the system Vet Connect NYC's care  
6 managers can continue to track a case until it is  
7 resolved. In cases where a service needed is provided  
8 by a city agency, Northwell Health's care managers  
9 can refer the case to DVS. DVS's outreach  
10 coordinator, coordinators then serve as the service  
11 provider making the warm handoff to a contact at the  
12 most appropriate city agency. At this time, I will  
13 demonstrate how to submit an assistance request for  
14 Vet Connect NYC.

15 [off mic dialogue]

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: We're just waiting  
17 for, for a cord to come in so I'm going to ask you  
18 some questions in the meantime and then as soon as  
19 we're, we're ready we'll... [cross-talk]

20 ADAM CONNOLLY: Sounds fair... [cross-talk]

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...begin. So, how  
22 many client's requests have been handled by Vet  
23 Connect NYC in 2019?

24 ADAM CONNOLLY: Currently it's 916  
25 requests.

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: 916, how is that compared to the, the previous years?

ADAM CONNOLLY: This was the first year that this program rolled out sir so that's what we have year to date.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Under the previous service you have account of how many.. [cross-talk]

ADAM CONNOLLY: Oh, under NYC Serves?

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah.

ADAM CONNOLLY: I, I would get that information for you sir at a later time.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay and what's... what do you estimate the number is going to be in 2020 if this year is 900... 916 based on the outreach that's being done and the success as you mentioned of Vet Connect, what do you anticipate as an estimate for 2020?

ADAM CONNOLLY: Certainly an increase year to date sir, our target goal right now is to increase the request month to date going into the next year with a contract, we do have a coordinated outreach program that we're currently working on setting up as far as social media and other avenues of, of that is concerned.

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2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, typically how  
3 many... how many requests like if you had 916 in 2019,  
4 how many requests come in per year per client?

5 ADAM CONNOLLY: currently it's a... it's an  
6 average of two to three requests per client sir.

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, two to three so  
8 916 would represent how many people?

9 ADAM CONNOLLY: Total unique clients  
10 right now is 483.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: 483, okay. How many  
12 veterans are there in New York City?

13 ADAM CONNOLLY: 210,000 approximately.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, out of 210,000  
15 veterans you serve 483 clients so, let's go back and  
16 tell me again how... what is the plan exactly, exactly  
17 through social media because obviously from the  
18 210,000 veterans not everyone has social media. As a  
19 matter of fact, this morning I, on the way into City  
20 Hall I was on the five train and I sat next to... I was  
21 fortunate to sit next to a veteran and he doesn't  
22 have, you know twitter, he doesn't have all kinds...  
23 all kinds of social media so a veteran who doesn't  
24 have the social media what... how, how are you planning  
25 to reach out to them?

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I... so, I can take this question. We have in the year to date in addition to social media, made sure we had materials about Vet Connect NYC at all of our community outreach events, our community coordinators attended upwards of 240 events in the last year so there's always this face to face opportunity to learn about Vet Connect NYC and what it can offer but now that we are moving into the second year of the program we are planning a large scale outreach campaign that will include both digital outreach on social media as well as print and local community newspapers so that's something that we're hoping to roll out in the next few months.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: You didn't... so, up until now you don't have any digital outreach?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Oh, sorry I didn't mean to imply that we didn't have any digital outreach... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah... [cross-talk]

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...we routinely post about social... Vet Connect NYC on social media, we've launched a podcast in the last year in which we discuss it as well, it's that I wanted to express

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2 that we have in person outreach that describes Vet  
3 Connect NYC in addition to our social media efforts.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, if you, you  
5 attended 240 events in 2019 and you had digital  
6 outreach and you had a podcast, with all three of  
7 these types of social media and outreach you still  
8 had 483 clients out of 210,000 veterans so is there  
9 anything additional to this that you're planning to  
10 do, do you have like contacts for the 210,000  
11 veterans?

12 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We have expanded our  
13 outreach network recently with an increased  
14 distribution list both for digital mailing and  
15 physical mailing so that will be part of the outreach  
16 campaign as well.

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, is that  
18 something that you have not done... not done until now?

19 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We have not done that  
20 kind of mass mailing at this... at this time.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Why is that?

22 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: When we acquired the  
23 network there's... as we will describe in the rest of  
24 the testimony a number of partners that we're working  
25 with who you will also hear from today, we wanted to

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2 ensure that when we transition from New York Serves  
3 to Vet Connect NYC that all of the partners were  
4 working well together, that everything was working in  
5 the system before we launched a major outreach  
6 campaign. So, in some ways this was sort of our pilot  
7 year to make sure that the system was working  
8 appropriately, and we're really pleased to see how  
9 it's progressed and now we feel confident that we can  
10 launch a, a large-scale outreach campaign.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, so you are  
12 doing... so, this is in addition to everything else  
13 that we just mentioned?

14 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yes... [cross-talk]

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, you're going to  
16 have a mailing and what is there going to be?

17 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: There's also going to  
18 be ads in community and local newspapers, we're also  
19 going to work with reaching out to the veteran's  
20 service organizations so that they can spread the  
21 word through their networks. Many veteran service  
22 organizations are... have already done so, talking  
23 about Vet Connect NYC in their weekly or monthly  
24 newsletters but we will continue to do that outreach.

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2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, when do you  
3 intend on sending out the, the mail list to, to all  
4 210,000 veterans?

5 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: So... well we don't have  
6 mailing addresses for all 210,000... [cross-talk]

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How many do...  
8 [cross-talk]

9 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...veterans... [cross-  
10 talk]

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...you have?

12 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We have approximately...  
13 I'd have to get that number to you sir; I don't have  
14 it off the top... [cross-talk]

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Approximately...  
16 [cross-talk]

17 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...head. I think we can...  
18 [cross-talk]

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I won't hold you to  
20 it.

21 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Okay... [cross-talk]

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Approximately.

23 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We have mailing  
24 addresses currently for approximately 75,000 veterans  
25 in New York City but this doesn't account for the

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amplifying effect that we will have when we work with the veteran service organizations like the VFW, the American Legion, etcetera so we're hoping that by partnering with them to conduct this outreach campaign we'll be able to reach a large portion of the veterans in New York City.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How many years has DVS been in existence?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Three years sir.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Three years, so during the three years you mentioned that you wanted to make sure that NY... the Vet Connect is working properly and the advocates are all on the same page and all so, so... I understand that but how come like we don't have the contacts in working with the advocates up until now to get the information of the... all the 210,000 veterans?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Well we don't ask our advocacy organizations for their mailing list, that's their private information that they've collect on their own. What we ask is for them to help us amplify the message about our programs and initiatives to their mailing lists so we don't know necessarily for instance how many folks are on the mailing list of

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2 the VSOs, we just know how much DVS has access to  
3 directly.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, is there any  
5 way that DVS on its own could get access?

6 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We're continuing to  
7 explore avenues for increasing the amount of people  
8 that we can reach, absolutely.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How do you intend  
10 to do that?

11 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Well through a  
12 combination of... through digital media and also  
13 through mailing addresses, we're continuing to  
14 explore what lists are available that we might be  
15 able to acquire and we're also looking at working  
16 with vendors who specialize in doing digital  
17 marketing and print outreach to help us figure out  
18 the most effective way to expand our outreach  
19 campaign.

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, why, why does...  
21 why does this take three years to, to, to start doing  
22 all this?

23 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Well over the first  
24 year of our agency we were really just kind of  
25 getting set up and staffing, when I started working

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for DVS I think there were four or five people on staff and about as many computers so we had some work to do to get established and then we've also started working on first the most pressing needs that the agency had which was addressing veteran homelessness so that was the first really big campaign that DVS focused on and then over the years we've brought... brought on additional staff, have been able to become a fully independent standalone agency and are now able to do more outreach campaigns.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Do you believe that veterans know veterans?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Absolutely sir.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, the... so, 75,000 veterans that you currently have... or have information on, did you do outreach to them asking them to bring other veterans on board?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We have not yet done a mailing to the veterans that we have on the list, this is something that we recently were able to assemble and... but it's something that we have planned to do in the next few months leading up to veterans day and immediately following veterans day.

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2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, so the next  
3 hearing... so, you would have the... those numbers would  
4 go out, 75,000?

5 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We would imagine so,  
6 yes.

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: You imagine so and  
8 is it... can you also give me the... those numbers, the  
9 exact numbers, you gave me an estimate... [cross-talk]

10 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yes sir... [cross-talk]

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...of 75,000 could  
12 you give me... [cross-talk]

13 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Absolutely... [cross-  
14 talk]

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...the exact numbers.  
16 Okay, so we're going... we're going to listen to the  
17 presentation but I just want to say on a positive... on  
18 a very positive note that I went on the, the Vet  
19 Connect server and... as well as some of my  
20 constituents and we also used the, the help line and  
21 they were actually very successful in having someone  
22 reaching out to them and offering the services so it  
23 was like someone called, they went on Vet Connect  
24 during the evening and then by next morning they got  
25 responded to so that is... that is truly... I was

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extremely impressed, and we all were, so I want to thank... I want to thank you for that.

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Thank you sir.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah. I'd also... before we begin, I just want to recognize Council Member Alan Maisel who's joined us.

ADAM CONNOLLY: So, sir at this time I'll continue with a live demonstration and just forgive me if I keep turning around, I don't have a lot of slack on this cord over here. So, what you see here is the front facing fillable form on the Vet Connect NYC website and it's displayed behind me as an example of what a client would put into this form should they be... should they navigate to this page or should they require a service request. You have the basic demographic information required. Please note the disclaimers if that veteran or individual is in crisis, they're appointed to the correct avenue for which they could seek assistance. If you... if you would like I can go line by line, but I was just going to submit the form and show you what the full process looks like if that's alright with you?

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, that's fine, yeah.

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ADAM CONNOLLY: Yeah. At the bottom of the form you're given the opportunity to sign to give your consent to be contacted. Bless you. Please note that consent is hyperlinked and will provide the client with an informed consent for participation information sharing form for reference or, or use if there if there is a verbal agreement or acknowledgment should you not have a, a computer or a phone with you when we engage a client. Once you submit the form the next screen will give you an option to export the form for your record and it will just give you that what I had just mentioned and it just pre-fills out your, your signature and your information and this is the point that triggers that three to five day follow up from the coordination center.

[off mic dialogue]

ADAM CONNOLLY: Displayed behind me is exactly what that form looks like for reference. Displayed on the slides is what the mobile interface looks like, it is just a condensed version of what's on the website with the same process and information required. This is a... an improved version of what the Unite Us platform looks like on the backend. So, this

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2 is what the coordination center sees just keep in  
3 mind that this isn't a real client, it's just a mock  
4 client and then the next slide it's mock metrics,  
5 doesn't reflect what's actually in the system just  
6 for privacy concerns but each client has their own  
7 unique page with all of their information and then  
8 you'll see next to that is actually the services  
9 based off of the area that they're in that are  
10 available that are in the network that the  
11 coordinator can refer the client to.

12 [off mic dialogue]

13 ADAM CONNOLLY: And the network analytics  
14 and data is displayed as such...

15 [off mic dialogue]

16 ADAM CONNOLLY: ...and that concludes the  
17 demo, I'll continue my testimony if there are no  
18 questions on that sir.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah so, is that...  
20 can you get on the DVS website from your computer?

21 ADAM CONNOLLY: Sure thing.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Great, so if  
23 someone goes on the DVS website how can they find Vet  
24 Connect? So, this is the first... this is the home  
25 page, right?

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yes, there's a...

[cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay... [cross-talk]

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...slider on... if you click... we had recently put up the podcast image for the main page of the slider so if you click through one it goes right to Vet Connect NYC... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, if you click on, on the first one?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: On... if you click on the first window of the slider it goes to Vet Connect NYC and that takes you to the Vet Connect NYC website. There's also on the DVS home page a, a menu option that says get help, right at the top of the page.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: No, my question is if someone... if someone's on the home page, you're on the first page, right?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Uh-huh.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And that... and they're looking for Vet Connect or they don't... they're not sure what they're looking for, what would someone do?

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2 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I would imagine they  
3 would go to the get help tab...

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay...

5 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...at the top of the  
6 page...

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, you have the  
8 get help tab there.

9 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: You'd click that...  
10 it's... sorry, on the left right under... nope, to the  
11 right, just get help.

12 ADAM CONNOLLY: Sorry...

13 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: It's okay and that  
14 takes you to an information page about Vet Connect  
15 NYC and if you click on the image it'll take you to  
16 the Vet Connect NYC website.

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, is there an  
18 easier way to this, I'm just curious like to have the  
19 Vet Connect on... [cross-talk]

20 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: So... [cross-talk]

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...on the home page...  
22 [cross-talk]

23 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...for the first six  
24 months after the launch of Vet Connect NYC it was the  
25 first slider on the home page, it was the first thing

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you would see on the home page and recently when we launched our podcast we moved it to the second slider but it's something that we can always work to improve on how we get people... make it clear on the home page that they can get to Vet Connect NYC.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Like what's the most crucial thing that someone would go on the DVS websites, is it the Vet Connect, is that something that's mostly used?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: So, we have some metrics on our website traffic that we can get to you that would explain how people navigate to the Vet Connect NYC website and the most popular web pages that people go to our website for.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, what is that?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I don't have that in front of me, but I'd be happy to get that... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Would you say... [cross-talk]

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...to you... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...Vet Connect is, is like the top?

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I would imagine that Vet Connect would be one of the... in the top category but I would need to look at the data to... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, what else is on the menu besides the, the get help page?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: So, if you go back to the home page like you scroll down just a little bit there is a box where it says I am looking for and if you click on that these categories are among the most frequently requested web pages based on our web site analytics which is why we have them listed here.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: What... I can't... I can't see... what is... what's that... the, the first three things?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: The, the first three things are meet the Commissioner, meet our team, get help so get help is the third most requested page on our website so that's why it's listed third on the... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, is there anyway to, to have that get help like on the home page before you get in there, before meeting the Commissioner?

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We can absolutely look at ways that we can increase traffic to the Vet Connect NYC page, absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Alright because, because Vet Connect was amazing and the only question is sometimes to navigate to the get help, to... you know because when someone's looking for services whether it's mental health or whatever the case is, homeless you know you want to give them that, that first easy access...

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay.

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you.

ADAM CONNOLLY: As you can see Vet Connect NYC is easy to access, easy to navigate and with real people providing the coordination of care, easy to connect service members, veterans, and family members to the resources that they need. How Vet Connect NYC performed. Since the launch of Vet Connect NYC in November 2018 through the end of August 2019 the platform managed 916 service requests for 483 veterans and family members across 20 categories. The top three most frequent requested

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2 ones being housing and shelter at 23 percent;  
3 employment at 19 percent and benefits navigation at  
4 12 percent. The bulk of service requests, 48 percent  
5 came in via the Vet Connect NYC website, this is  
6 followed by phone calls and walk ins at 42 percent  
7 and a smaller percentage being referred directly from  
8 the network providers themselves at ten percent. The  
9 average number of days from the veteran or family  
10 member making initial contact at the coordination  
11 care center to getting a referral to a service  
12 provider was five days. The average number of days  
13 from the first contacting of Vet Connect NYC to  
14 resolution of a case was 12 days. DVS is working with  
15 our partners at IVMF and Northwell Health to ensure  
16 that we are doing everything we can to be responsive  
17 to veterans and their families in the timeliest way  
18 possible and are consistently striving to improve our  
19 processes to be more streamlined, efficient and  
20 swift. DVS is also committed to ensuring that the  
21 network of service providers meets the needs of our  
22 veterans and their families and to that end is  
23 working tirelessly to expand the network. To provide  
24 context on what this means when DVS launched Vet  
25 Connect NYC in November of 2018 there were 80 vetted

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2 service providers in the network, as of July 2019  
3 this number increased to 102 service providers. When  
4 the current onboarding process is completed it will  
5 represent a 60 percent increase in the number of  
6 service providers in the network from launch to  
7 present. Next steps. To ensure we're reaching the  
8 widest possible audience of New York City service  
9 members, veterans and their families DVS is working  
10 in close partnership with the Mayor's Office of  
11 Operations to map out a large scale outreach campaign  
12 using both social media posts, explainer videos and  
13 print media including ads in ethnic and community  
14 newspapers to be launched in the coming months. DVS  
15 also invites each and every city Council Member to  
16 link to Vet... to link Vet Connect NYC on their own  
17 websites helping to ensure that your veteran and  
18 military family member constituents are aware of and  
19 have access to the free services that they have  
20 earned. DVS would also welcome the opportunity to  
21 work with your communications team to develop  
22 appropriate language that meets the specific needs of  
23 your constituencies to both understand and gain  
24 access to Vet Connect NYC and of course provide the  
25 Vet Connect NYC official logo for your websites. In

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conclusion, in partnership with IVMF, Northwell Health and Unite Us with Vet Connect NYC we've created the most comprehensive service network in New York City, our sole purpose is helping service providers, veterans, survivors and families find the resources they need to live fulfilling and purpose driven lives. With the planned outreach campaign, we feel confident that we will expand our reach to thousands of additional veterans connected to families... connected to programs, excuse me and benefits that they have earned through their service to our country. We look forward to the continued partnership of the Council in advocating for veterans and their families in New York City, we thank you again for this opportunity to meet with you today. At this time, we would be happy to address your questions.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you. So,

after, after Vet Connect connects a, a client, a veteran to one of the providers is there any follow up from DVS?

ADAM CONNOLLY: At this time, we're not

conducting survey... any type of follow up for them but that is planned in our contract amendment because

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2 that was cited as a need in terms of information...

3 [cross-talk]

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So... [cross-talk]

5 ADAM CONNOLLY: ...we will have that for  
6 the next year... [cross-talk]

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: The provider will  
8 get this information to Vet Connect, right... I mean to  
9 DVS.

10 ADAM CONNOLLY: Say that one more time,  
11 I'm sorry.

12 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, that provider  
13 would get the information to DVS and then you would  
14 have it logged in?

15 ADAM CONNOLLY: Well we would have to  
16 send the client some sort of a survey that we've  
17 drafted to actually see not only that they've been  
18 connected to services but how that went and if they  
19 were really helped by it.

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, so I'd like  
21 to go to my colleague Council Member Alicka Ampry-  
22 Samuel to ask a few questions.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Good  
24 morning everyone. what's the most prevalent case  
25 because I, I see in your testimony you mentioned like

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2 housing and like just the percentages but can you  
3 breakdown between what comes in the office, what you  
4 see through the hotline and what you receive via  
5 online as far as those actual numbers?

6 ADAM CONNOLLY: So... [cross-talk]

7 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Like is  
8 there more of a breakdown of folks coming in for help  
9 with housing walking into versus those who are  
10 submitting a form via online?

11 ADAM CONNOLLY: I do believe I have that  
12 information and I'll; I'll sift through here and grab  
13 that for you... [cross-talk]

14 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Okay...  
15 [cross-talk]

16 ADAM CONNOLLY: ...just the general  
17 overarching metrics I'll say Council Woman is the web  
18 form 47 percent, call and walk ins at 42 percent and  
19 network provider referrals at ten percent just to  
20 provide some context and just allow me a moment to  
21 look through here. Please feel free if you want to  
22 continue with your... [cross-talk]

23 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: And then...  
24 [cross-talk]

25 ADAM CONNOLLY: ...questions... [cross-talk]

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COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...I was also going to ask can you just give us like a, a walk through of a typical day of the coordinators and their jobs because I see where there is a three to five business day lag or response time and for me that just seems a little long, I know it's an improvement from the other system but you know just can you just explain to us why it would take three to five business days in order for someone who is looking for services to be... for their to be some level of response?

ADAM CONNOLLY: For sure and I would... I would cite the volume that we aggregated so the total service requests being 916 from those 400 plus clients it's averaging about 22 requests a day for the coordination center, I think if that was a priority request and the client needed emergency services they have that option to express that and we would prioritize them for sure but I think that, that lag is just the typical caseload day to day for the coordination center.

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: So, I'm thinking like if it's not a... like a crisis but someone needs information right away would that

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2 individual like... could there be somebody that  
3 responds to them like right away as opposed... I mean  
4 it's not an emergency, but they would like some level  
5 of information like by the next day because they have  
6 a court hearing...

7 ADAM CONNOLLY: Oh yeah, for sure so in  
8 the... speaking about the dynamic sense of request that  
9 our clients have if our coordinator... if our DVS  
10 coordinators are engaging clients at a veterans  
11 resource center in the field and they have a pending  
12 case like that we wouldn't refer that right away  
13 specifically to Vet Connect, we would potentially  
14 refer the other issues they may bring up in this  
15 hypothetical situation to them if it's not a needed  
16 priority.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Okay, okay,  
18 okay. And while you're looking for those numbers you  
19 also mentioned in the testimony that the first  
20 process was doing outreach and like a campaign for  
21 homeless veterans so can you talk to us a little  
22 about some outcomes or what you saw and like just the  
23 level of work that you were able to do since that was  
24 the first mass... [cross-talk]

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Sure, the homelessness prevention and... the homelessness support and services line of action as we call it at DVS is the most mature, it's the first area that DVS really focused on as an agency citing the fact that this was the most pressing need to address the homelessness crisis among veterans. So, I don't have the exact statistics on how many homeless veterans there were in 2016 as opposed to now but there's been a steady decrease over the years and we are at this point according to our last point in time count in January seeing that almost all of the homeless veterans that are still in New York City are in shelter, there are very few cases of street homeless veterans so we've made tremendous progress in that area and I'm not sure if you had any other specific questions about the homelessness program but I'd be happy to...

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: You just made me think about something... [cross-talk]

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Sure... [cross-talk]

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...when you said you don't have the numbers to compare is it because you don't have it now or... [cross-talk]

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yeah, I'd be happy to get those numbers to you, we do absolutely have those figures I just don't have them in front of me.

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Okay, because I was like well how do you know you've decreased if you don't have the numbers.

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: No, we do... we do have those numbers and I'll get them to you after the hearing.

ADAM CONNOLLY: So, I... Council Woman I found the numbers you were looking for. So, by service request for the entire program duration we have our total requests there, unfortunately this... the way that we pulled these metrics don't have exactly what percentage of those are walk ins versus the web form, if you want to do some hasty math and we could pull that for you but you could put that 47 percent of web services versus the 140 requests for employment for example just to have an idea but I can... that's a commitment I'll make that I can get those specific volume requests.

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Okay and the only reason why I'm asking that question is because when you say that you want to make sure that

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2 folks are not falling through the cracks it's, it's  
3 really good to get a sense of where people are  
4 accessing services and how and what those numbers are  
5 to really get a sense of the work that you're doing  
6 and to see what else can be done in, in maybe to beef  
7 up your outreach or you know figure out a different  
8 way to do outreach and I think it's critical to be  
9 able to focus on the way you track at this... the  
10 beginning stages as opposed to you know three years  
11 from now realizing that we should have done something  
12 different and I just think that it's helpful to have  
13 that now.

14 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: No, absolutely and  
15 this is one of the reasons why we wanted to wait  
16 until we had some data before we did a large scale  
17 outreach campaign to make sure that we were targeting  
18 print versus digital for instance appropriately based  
19 on the needs that we were seeing in the first nine  
20 months of the program.

21 ADAM CONNOLLY: I will say though a great  
22 recommendation going into the next year of the  
23 contract of how we target our outreach though Council  
24 Woman so thank you for that.

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COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Okay and the social media, Vet Connect can you... is there any outreach or any campaigns on social media outside of just the NYC?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Outside of NYC Veterans?

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Yes.

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: So, we have NYC Veterans on twitter, Facebook and Instagram and so we routinely promote Vet Connect NYC as just a matter of course and including in all of our monthly newsletters as well and we also have postcards that... with Vet Connect NYC information to hand out at events, we've in fact brought a stack of postcards here that we can bring to your Council offices if you wish and we've had two major events thus far where we've distributed mass quantities of these kinds of printed materials that would be when we launched Vet Connect NYC on Veterans Day last year and during fleet week Northwell Health our... one of our partners sponsored a major event to cap off fleet week called side by side in which we were, were at Rockefeller Center for the entire day on Saturday during fleet week and distributed a great deal of print material

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2 there. So, we're trying to make sure that we combine  
3 both print and digital in our outreach efforts.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, thank you.  
5 How many... how many mental health providers does Vet  
6 Connect have?

7 ADAM CONNOLLY: 13 sir.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, how does it  
9 work, so if someone goes on Vet Connect and requests  
10 for mental health resources so how would that work  
11 between the 13 providers?

12 ADAM CONNOLLY: So, if, if it's not a... an  
13 imminent threat, if the... if the client isn't suicidal  
14 visibly so that process flow really... the... so the  
15 coordination center will receive that request, the  
16 request will be pending review, that three to five  
17 days elapses, the coordinator will then assess the  
18 client. Now during their assessment of the client is  
19 when the coordinator in that backend platform Unite  
20 Us will have all of those mental service... health care  
21 service providers available to them hopefully if  
22 there's one close by to the client's home of record  
23 they would assign them there if it meets... if it fits  
24 the bill, it really just depends on what the issue is  
25 and which provider best services the client.

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, how many... how many of the 13 are, are under Thrive NYC?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I don't think we that information at this time, but we could certainly look into getting you a more specific response to that. I think the important thing to note is that there are... the, the range of health care providers as my colleague mentioned matched according to geography to make sure that they are close by and easy to access but also to make sure that they are eligible for those services so whatever the kind of mental health need that they have the... there's going to be some sort of referral made so that they can access those services.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: If a veteran should contact 888 NYC Well would that bounce back to Vet Connect or is Thrive NYC going to deal with it?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Okay, we would have to check, check on that and get back to you with that information.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, if... again, if someone contacts Thrive NYC, right should they be receiving... it's a veteran contacting 888 NYC Well, it's not an emergency, would they get a response?

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ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: They would get a response from DVS and then if the outreach coordinators could help them get connected through Vet Connect NYC.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, it would go back through... [cross-talk]

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: My understanding of the process is that if somebody was reaching out to 3-1-1 or NYC Well and said that they were a veteran that DVS would be alerted to that and that we could help them make the appropriate referral but I'm not in charge of the program for the mental health initiative so we would have to confirm that and get back to you with further detail.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: But they, they have providers who work with DVS, right?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: The Vet Connect NYC platform?

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah.

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yes, they have providers that we also work with directly but we are trying to make sure that we use the Vet Connect NYC platform for the purposes of tracking the veterans

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progress through the referral so that they don't get lost in the process.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, of the 13 you would say that half or more than half is not under Thrive NYC?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I can't really make that determination without checking back at our... looking more at the process we're close... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I think we... I think we spoke about this at the last... at one of the hearings, is it possible for providers?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I would have to check and get back that information.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Joe... [cross-talk]

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: ...to you.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Joe how many providers are part of Thrive NYC, do you know offhand?

[off mic dialogue]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Eight... no, they're saying four... through Thrive. Yeah, okay.

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We'll get you that information.

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, great, okay.

How does DVS decide which veteran service organization is, is best suited to address a veteran's needs?

ADAM CONNOLLY: So, when... during our targeted outreach when we visit VSOs we assess their capabilities, how we can help them, if they are encouraged, they have the resources and, and willing to assist with projecting our services into the community, we encourage that and will assist them with that if they need some help, we'll collect those issues that... and concerns that they have and get back to them in a timely fashion.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, these providers need to reach out to DVS or does DVS also try to reach out to find new providers?

ADAM CONNOLLY: So, at the coordinator level as it relates to VSOs definitely a two way conversation sir, you know when we're out in the field and we meet constituents, supporters, VSOs Vet Connect NYC is always part of the conversation and if an organization is interested in joining I think about operation lower your shield most recently. I had a conversation with Ed Schloeman just to pull an

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2 example and he... his organization was interested in  
3 joining, immediately connected on the same day. If  
4 someone expresses that they have heard about Vet  
5 Connect NYC and they want to know more we're always  
6 happy to share that information but our objective is  
7 always to add the best providers to that network and  
8 really include anyone that wants to kind of commit  
9 and help out to the initiative.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, who determines  
11 that DVS?

12 ADAM CONNOLLY: So, anybody that's  
13 interested we would connect them to the... excuse me  
14 IVMF and they have a vetting procedure where they  
15 will then engage the client and make that  
16 determination if they're eligible for the network.

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, I'm sorry, who  
18 does it go through?

19 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: So, we have... anybody  
20 that contacts DVS with an interest in joining Vet  
21 Connect NYC we connect to IVMF, the Syracuse  
22 University Institute for Military Veteran... Family...  
23 Veteran and Military Families and they have a vetting  
24 process that they would put the organization through  
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to make sure that they are able to take on the, the responsibilities of being part of the network.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Do we know how many providers reached out to IVMF over the last three years and how many were actually accepted and how many were denied?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We know for instance how many were brought on over... since we launched Vet Connect NYC in November of 2018 so we had 80 vetted service providers in the network then and as we referred to in our testimony we have 102 service providers now, we're also in the process of vetting or onboarding an additional 26 service providers so that's just from November of 2018 to August 2019.

ADAM CONNOLLY: If we... if we reach back, we can dig out exactly the unique cases for each one of those providers though and see the nature of their onboarding whether they heard about us via a website visit and inquired versus us soliciting their services.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Is there a tab on the website for providers to join Vet Connect?

ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: On the Vet Connect NYC website?

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2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah.

3 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I would have to look  
4 more thoroughly through the website to get back to  
5 you with that information.

6 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And how about on  
7 the... on the... on the veterans... on DVS website?

8 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I believe there is,  
9 but I haven't looked at the content... [cross-talk]

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Do you have it  
11 here, the DVS website?

12 ADAM CONNOLLY: Yes, I have it... [cross-  
13 talk]

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, can we...  
15 [cross-talk]

16 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: We can pull it up...  
17 [cross-talk]

18 ADAM CONNOLLY: Sure thing.

19 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: I do want to mention  
20 at this time we're really happy that we have now  
21 added a digital outreach manager to our team at the...  
22 at DVS who's going to be doing a thorough assessment  
23 and audit of the website to see how we can improve  
24 and add more information to make it more accessible  
25 to our constituents.

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2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Who is that?

3 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: It's Gayle Sociano  
4 [sp?] who's right here.

5 [off mic dialogue]

6 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yeah, it seems that we  
7 still have some work to do on the website to make  
8 sure that that's clear for service providers how they  
9 can become part of the network.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, great,  
11 alright, I appreciate it.

12 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Yes.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, I think  
14 we'll, we'll end this part.

15 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Thank you very much.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, thank...  
17 [cross-talk]

18 ADAM CONNOLLY: Thank you sir... [cross-  
19 talk]

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Alright, hold on  
21 one second, not too quick, hold on. Oh, okay, yeah  
22 you can ask... sorry.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: I didn't  
24 want to bombard you with a bunch of questions. The  
25 average age of individuals using the system as well

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as male or female and the breakdown of the borough and it's like who's using the most...

ADAM CONNOLLY: Oh, yeah for sure ma'am, so the two age groups that have the most interaction with the system are the 25 to 34 and the 35 to 44 and then by borough, just bear with me for a moment... so, from most to least Brooklyn at 29 percent, Queens 23, Manhattan 21, Bronx 17, Staten Island two percent and undisclosed eight percent.

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Can you go back to the age again?

ADAM CONNOLLY: Sure.

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Percentage wise?

ADAM CONNOLLY: I have a... it's a... it's a bar chart, I don't have the exact percentages but... so, from most to least I'll go that way; it'll be 25 to 34 being the most, 35 to 44, 55 to 64, 45 to 54, 65 to 74, 18 to 24 and then 75 plus being the least.

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: And with the bar chart is it a significant portion of 25 to 34 or just the 25 to 44 in comparison to the older population and I'm just asking that question just

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2 looking at, you know the war on Iraq and Afghanistan  
3 versus Vietnam and just trying to figure out...

4 ADAM CONNOLLY: Yeah, looking at that,  
5 that war era I'd say they... if I put all these  
6 together it's about half, half of those requests are  
7 the older generation veterans.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Okay,  
9 alright, thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you very much  
11 and if you could send the, the Commissioner my  
12 regards and hope you all had a great summer.

13 ADAM CONNOLLY: Thank you very much  
14 Chair.

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, thank you  
16 very much.

17 ALEXIS WICHOWSKI: Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thanks. I'd like to  
19 call up Anthony Silvera, Juan Serrano, Maureen Casey  
20 and Mary Bier.

21 [off mic dialogue]

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you all,  
23 start clockwise.

24 MARY BIER: Good morning Chairperson  
25 Deutsch and members of the Committee on Veterans. My

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2 name is Mary Bier and I am the National Director of  
3 Military Initiatives at Unite us. I'm also a military  
4 spouse, my husband is active duty army, so I  
5 understand firsthand the challenges that veterans,  
6 our service members and military families face. I  
7 work directly with all of our military connected  
8 networks including Vet Connect NYC and I support  
9 provider onboarding and engagement efforts, conduct  
10 software training for all users and support the  
11 network data and reporting efforts managed by the  
12 IVMF. Unite Us is a veteran led technology company  
13 that powers coordinated care networks of health and  
14 human service providers. In 2013, Unite Us was born  
15 after Dan Brillman, an air force reserve pilot and  
16 Taylor Justice, an army veteran reflected on their  
17 personal experience of transitioning out of the  
18 military. Both Dan and Taylor wanted to alleviate the  
19 problems that veterans and their families experienced  
20 during the shift back to civilian life. They  
21 witnessed firsthand the complexities of navigating  
22 health and social services because of a fragmented  
23 delivery system and its negative impact on people's  
24 health. Dan and Taylor worked with groups like the  
25 IVMF and DVS to expand this new model of care which

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2 has now led to Unite Us expansion across the country  
3 to serve every person in need. Today Unite Us is  
4 committed to building a system in which every person  
5 in need has simplified access to the resources they  
6 are looking for, a truly interconnected system that  
7 starts in the community. We have become the leading  
8 social care coordination software that powers over 50  
9 coordinated networks across 22 different states. This  
10 work which started in New York City with our partners  
11 here today has helped the entire health and human  
12 services industry adopt our innovative and proven  
13 model. The largest health systems, health plans and  
14 governments across the country work with Unite Us as  
15 their trusted partners to integrate health and social  
16 services. Kaiser Permanente has chosen Unite Us to  
17 power the network serving their 12.4 million members  
18 and CVS Health has chosen us to help some of Aetna's  
19 most vulnerable Medicaid and dual eligible members.  
20 The state of North Carolina has chosen Unite Us as  
21 their statewide infrastructure for the largest  
22 coordinated care network of its kind. We are proud  
23 that our solution has been validated by some of the  
24 leading government, health care, community and  
25 philanthropic organizations in the country. We

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2 couldn't have gotten to this point with our initial  
3 success... without our initial success helping veterans  
4 and their families. Unite Us is the common technology  
5 platform that connects all of the service  
6 organizations together in Vet Connect NYC. We empower  
7 health and human service providers to work together  
8 integrating health and social care. With Unite Us  
9 providers across sectors can send and receive secure  
10 referrals, track every person's total health journey  
11 and report on tangible outcomes across a full range  
12 of services in a centralized, cohesive and  
13 collaborative ecosystem. This social infrastructure  
14 helps communities transform their ability to track  
15 outcomes, improve health and measure impact at scale.  
16 I'd like to thank the city of New York and the  
17 Department of Veterans Services, the IVMF and  
18 Northwell Health for their contributions to this  
19 network and their commitment to improving health  
20 outcomes in our community. Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Mary. Do  
22 you think there's any improvement that needs to be  
23 done with Vet Connect?

24 MARY BIER: There... the things that we've  
25 talked about today about improving... or excuse me,

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expanding the providers in the network, I think that that's something we've all identified, I think increasing the way that clients can access care is another thing that's also been discussed, I would agree with both of those things as areas to improve.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How would you feel is the best way to expand, expand providers?

MARY BIER: One of the things that we haven't quite touched on yet is using the existing providers within the network as a recruitment source. So, we have this list of providers that are currently active in the network, we know that they are likely sending traditional referrals to other folks in the community, other service providers and it'd be great to dip into that pool too.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Great, excellent, thank you.

MARY BIER: Thank you.

MAUREEN CASEY: Chairperson Deutsch and members of the Committee my name is Maureen Casey and I'd like to begin by thanking you for your work on behalf of New York City's veterans and their families and more immediately for the opportunity to address you on the work that America Serves does in

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2 partnership with Unite Us, Northwell Health, the  
3 city's Department of Veteran Services in serving this  
4 population. I'm here today representing Syracuse  
5 University's Institute for Veterans and Military  
6 Families, the only academic institute of its kind in  
7 the nation focused exclusively on the post service  
8 lives of our veterans and military connected  
9 families. Over the past decade in addition to the  
10 research and policy analysis you might expect from an  
11 institute situated on a university campus we have  
12 been building and delivering innovative and impactful  
13 programs to include entrepreneurship and other  
14 vocational training as well as our coordinated  
15 service delivery work in communities. To date the  
16 IVMF has assisted more than 125,000 service members  
17 and veterans across the globe as they transition out  
18 of uniform or pursue civilian careers, higher  
19 education or community-based care and services. Our  
20 working communities through the America Serves  
21 program began with an idea taken from our research.  
22 We discovered that out of all of the challenges the  
23 military connected population faces the majority  
24 reported that navigating the sea of programs,  
25 benefits and services available to them was their

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2 greatest. From this we saw that community providers  
3 could play a bigger role in serving this population.  
4 However, their true impact is only unlocked when  
5 organized into coordinated networks that stand ready  
6 to refer to veterans across a broad continuum of  
7 providers willing and able to meet the many needs a  
8 veteran may be experiencing. Like with so many things  
9 New York City led the way. The Robin Hood Foundation  
10 saw us as the ideal partner to improve service  
11 navigation and delivery in New York City particularly  
12 given our successful work with building networks to  
13 address veteran homelessness through the VA's SSVF  
14 program. Over the course of four short years what  
15 started here in New York City has become a national  
16 movement that has brought us to 11 states, in that  
17 time our networks have served more than 27,000  
18 clients across the country and we've gained critical  
19 insights that we can now bring back to our providers  
20 and clients in New York City and elsewhere. The IVMF  
21 is the only organization that works with numerous  
22 federal partners, engages state governments across  
23 the country and provides direct communication and  
24 insight to providers on the ground. This is enabled  
25 by the way networks collect data, reflect on those

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2 data both locally and nationally and adapt their  
3 strategies to meet the changing needs of the  
4 population they serve. For example, in New York City  
5 clients of Vet Connect America Serves demonstrated  
6 considerable demand for providers who could offer  
7 legal services learning this the network was able to  
8 react and add a significant number of new legal  
9 providers who were able to meet this demand. We are  
10 now armed with the information needed to constantly  
11 adapt and improve the way we serve those who have  
12 served in our nation's defense. Since the launch of  
13 Vet Connect, we've served almost 5,000 clients and  
14 processed more than 900 requests. If those numbers  
15 seem low to, to you perhaps consider the fact that we  
16 have been in this community for four years already  
17 and in that time your community providers have helped  
18 serve almost 4,000 clients and processed over 6,000  
19 requests, these successes are yours as well. And Vet  
20 Connect the city of New York... in... with Vet Connect  
21 the city of New York has institutionalized a program  
22 that meets the goals that should be a priority for  
23 all of us to better serve veterans and military  
24 families in our communities and can be summed up in  
25 the words of a spouse whose husband sought services

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through America Serves, she said not only does my husband have help but for the first time in a very long time he has hope. Thank you for this opportunity and I'm happy to answer any questions.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you. So, in your... in your opinion how do you feel that Vet Connect can improve?

MAUREEN CASEY: I think that Vet Connect has been doing very well getting off the ground over the past nine months, I think it's important to remember that while America Serves existed prior to that time we were precluded from engaging with the city DVS during that contractual negotiation period and so since that time I think that Northwell together with DVS and the IVMF has been doing very well, I concur with some of the recommendations to date around how we better make informed consumers out of our veterans who live in New York City to ensure that they know that this network exists and they have this ability to essentially walk through a single door and get all of the services that they need, I think that we've been doing a very good job in partnership with our colleagues here at the table with regard to provider engagement, there's always

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more that we can do in that regard, I think that we have taken a more measured approach, I think one thing that we've learned from our work and our experience is that you want to be able to serve a veteran when they ask and the biggest risk is that if they come and they ask for a service and we're not able to provide it so we've taken a measured approach in our growth and I think that we've established a very good foundation and we're ready to move forward.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Great, thank you

Maureen, thank you.

JUAN SERRANO: It's on. Good morning

Chair, Chairperson Deutsch and Committee members. I am Juan Serrano, I'm the Assistant Vice President for Military and Veteran Liaison Services for Northwell Health. I am being accompanied today by Anthony Silvera, he is the Supervisor of Vet Connect in New York City, he oversees the day to day operations of the coordination center and he's also a United States Airforce veteran, served 30 years. I too would like to thank you for your steadfast work and commitment to veterans, I myself am a veteran and can tell you firsthand the importance of having services like America Serves and Vet Connect New York... New York

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2 City. These kinds of services didn't exist when I  
3 returned home after medical discharge in 2009, I am a  
4 United States combat veteran Marine, a native, native  
5 of Hollis, Queens. During my nine years in the  
6 military I served with second battalion sixth  
7 marines, first battalion seventh marines, the jungle  
8 warfare training center and marine corps recruiting  
9 station New Jersey. In 2003 I suffered a neck injury  
10 in Iraq so severe I couldn't continue my military  
11 career. Unfortunately, at the time there was no Vet  
12 Connect New York City for me or for my family to  
13 reach out for help. The military is engraved in me,  
14 it is who I am as a person, my service has always  
15 been impacted by my family and my friends who by  
16 extension also served with me or by my side. As a  
17 result, I was determined to make it my career to help  
18 people facing the same issues I encountered. As  
19 assistant Vice President of Northwell Health's  
20 military and services division we're doing work to  
21 support active duty service members, veterans and  
22 their families. We have a growing program that  
23 assists with all aspects of healthcare, career  
24 development and more. Northwell is New York's largest  
25 private employer and one of our... programs for our

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2 veteran employees is our paid to finish a program.  
3 This highly successful initiative was introduced in  
4 2009 as another way to take care of our employees who  
5 are also currently serving and possibly inspire other  
6 staff members to answer the call to serve. Upon their  
7 return all employees receive a differential check,  
8 this benefit makes up the difference between the  
9 military pay and salary for Northwell employees  
10 currently serving in the... in the... in the reserves and  
11 then called into active duty. Since the inception of  
12 this program we've paid over 1.7 million dollars.  
13 Northwell Health strives to improve the health in  
14 communities it serves. We are committed to the  
15 following; providing the highest quality of care,  
16 educating the current and future generation of health  
17 care professionals, searching for new ways in advance  
18 through groundbreaking biomedical research, promoting  
19 health, education and caring for the entire community  
20 regardless of the ability to pay. Northwell is  
21 exceptionally qualified to assist and support  
22 veterans. For over a decade we proudly stood side by  
23 side with the military community, once we learned of  
24 the value and the importance of Vet Connect New York  
25 City we began to refine it and cultivate an already

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2 strong relationship with these organizations knowing  
3 that together we could make a difference. Michael  
4 Jordan famously said that talent wins games but  
5 teamwork and intelligence wins championships. So we  
6 partnered with America Serves in 2016 to head  
7 operations for the New York Serves NYC, at the time  
8 one six America Serves coordination centers in the  
9 United States is staffed by a supervisor to my left,  
10 a care coordinator and an intake specialist,  
11 Northwell employees through all the coordination  
12 center is to link service members, veterans and their  
13 families to a network of over 100 community and  
14 national service providers. Northwell Health  
15 solutions, the health system's care management  
16 organization that implements and stores our base care  
17 programs and our based... value-based programs have  
18 been running the coordination center operations and  
19 my office has led the initiative in the community.  
20 We've also been working with America Serves to  
21 establish a secondary hub, New York Serves... that will  
22 support more than 150,000 veterans who live in Nassau  
23 and Suffolk counties. Coordinating care and providing  
24 services for veterans is within Northwell's  
25 wheelhouse, it is what we do, and we're pleased to

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2 carry out this mission. Whether someone spends four  
3 years or four years in the armed forces it is  
4 essential for them to get adequate, efficient  
5 resources that they deserve and while plenty of  
6 veterans reintegrate easily many struggles with  
7 setbacks associated with transition... with the  
8 transition process. We're here to help and direct New  
9 York City's heroes to the right resources as  
10 efficiently as possible. We know there is much work  
11 that we can do especially if we continue to work  
12 together, this partnership with Vet Connect New York  
13 City has the promise to reach even more veterans and  
14 their families. On behalf of Northwell Health I thank  
15 you for your continued support of Vet Connect New  
16 York City, I look forward to your continued  
17 partnership in the future and we'll be happy to  
18 answer any questions that you may have.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Juan,  
20 thank you for your service, thank you.

21 ANTHONY SILVERA: Sir I'm, I'm here if  
22 you have any specific questions... [cross-talk]

23 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Questions... oh,  
24 okay... [cross-talk]

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JUAN SERRANO: Anthony is here, again as I stated in my statement, Anthony Silvera he is the, the individual who oversees the day to day operations, he's the supervisor, he's the glue between the city of New York, providers and our market.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, I have a question for all four of you. So, if there are... if, if a veteran tries to access Vet Connect and they have issues or they have ideas of how to improve Vet Connect who does he or she reach out to number one or is it... is it possible to have a meeting with all the advocates, with the people who have experience like as yourselves to just come up with ideas and, and just speak about their experience of Vet Connect?

MAUREEN CASEY: I can... I'm happy to start sir, we're always willing to meet and to listen and to obtain feedback, I think that that has been one of the hallmarks of this process where, where we started four years ago with America Serves New York City, we've come a long way and Mary testified to that in terms of where Unite Us is now with respect to the greater healthcare network so always available to take feedback. We, the IVMF have someone that is a

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2 market lead assigned here in New York City, so he too  
3 is always available so happy to, to meet with any of  
4 the constituency groups or with any individual  
5 veterans.

6 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, so... yeah, go  
7 ahead.

8 MARY BIER: And to add to that, the, the  
9 table that you see here, the partners, Unite Us, IVMF  
10 and Northwell we all meet weekly to talk about  
11 network performance and opportunities like this on  
12 ways that we can improve so we take feedback from  
13 clients, from partners in the network and also  
14 software feedback, how is the software working for  
15 people that are actually using it.

16 JUAN SERRANO: And as I mentioned we are  
17 the largest private employer in New York State and  
18 also the largest provider of health care in the  
19 region for veterans outside of the VA, we have a  
20 robust program and everything that we do is trying to  
21 connect individuals with unique services and also  
22 take the feedback because that's how we learn, we  
23 can't continue to go home assuming that we know what  
24 the hopes, the needs and the wants are for veterans,  
25 we have to ask and we're doing a good job. We also

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engage in quarterly meetings; we have a report house where we actually bring in our service providers and I think Tony can tell a little more to that.

ANTHONY SILVERA: Yes sir, so we do have, you know meetings monthly with the city, our city partners, we also have ways that veterans if they want to contact us for information so on our Vet Connect NYC website where it says contact if they have questions that they want to ask directly about the process or to actually be a member of the network that's a way that they can reach out because we will get emails in and we can reach back out to them so..

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Great, so if, if we set up a meeting with the people sitting at the table with advocates would that be fine?

JUAN SERRANO: Absolutely..

MARY BIER: Of course..

ANTHONY SILVERA: Absolutely..

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: All agreed, okay, so if you don't mind if you could leave your contact information with Joe Bello and I'd love to have at the roundtable a meeting with, with advocates and some veterans just to have a, a nice conversation to see what... [cross-talk]

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2 MARY BIER: That's great... [cross-talk]

3 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...ideas they have or  
4 if they have any obstacles when they go onto Vet  
5 Connect, I'd really appreciate that.

6 MAUREEN CASEY: You're welcome.

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you so much,  
8 thank you. Oh, you have a question?

9 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: A quick  
10 question, you know I always have a question, I'm a...  
11 yeah, my husband was a... you know in the military, I  
12 was a military spouse, right... [cross-talk]

13 JUAN SERRANO: Thank you for your  
14 service... [cross-talk]

15 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...for many  
16 years... [cross-talk]

17 ANTHONY SILVERA: Thank you for your  
18 service... [cross-talk]

19 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...and my  
20 husband was an officer and was deployed to Iraq and  
21 Afghanistan and my husband is a disabled vet now. I  
22 remember when my husband came home the second time  
23 from Afghanistan and we had a small child and it was  
24 very difficult because I was not working, he had just  
25 come home, he was injured and so he was not working

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and we were just trying to navigate the system so in a situation like that when you have a, a... you know like a, a family with a child and both parents are not working and just trying to figure things out how do you assist them just like a... like just quick...

JUAN SERRANO: So, first... [cross-talk]

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...and we were... like we were trying to figure out what... it was this running joke in the house, we wouldn't go outside because at the time we didn't have health insurance.

JUAN SERRANO: Right... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: Right, right... [cross-talk]

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: So, we just had a lot of vitamins and... [cross-talk]

JUAN SERRANO: Right... [cross-talk]

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...you know we... it was... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: So... yeah, so first I want to thank you for your service as a spouse, also your husband's service, what branch was he in?

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Army...

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ANTHONY SILVERA: In the army, alright, I won't hold that against him, I'm an Airforce guy but I want to thank you so much for your service. So, first off, you know the beautiful thing about Vet Connect and this whole concept, right, is it's designed to be one stop shopping, right, for one opportunity whether you pick up the phone or you go to the Vet Connect... Vet Connect NYC website and you submit a request as the, the Chairman said that someone reached out to us and we're pretty responsive, we triage the request how they come in so, simply in your case, you know we would hope that you'd reach out to us and then we'd have a conversation with you, we'd talk with you about what's going on, you know part of the intake is designed to ask some basic information to kind of find out, you know where you're at and kind of what's going on and we have that conversation with you to determine what we have in the network and how we're able to assist you so it starts with that simple conversation or that intake and hopefully I think we do a very good job of connecting with our veterans and family members that reach out to us and it's all about that connection, right, it's all about being

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2 open enough and being pleasant enough to have that  
3 conversation to dig a little deeper about what's  
4 going on and to show you the array of services that  
5 we have. So, in a broad brush that's, that's  
6 essentially what we do, right, is to peel back the  
7 onion and find out what their needs are because as  
8 you already found out one request usually turns into  
9 two sometimes it could be three and the most we've  
10 had is about five with one veteran so... did I answer  
11 your question?

12 JUAN SERRANO: And I would like to add to  
13 that. So, we have been partners... we have been  
14 collaborating with the IVMF and the city for quite  
15 some time and one of the issues that we face with  
16 connectivity, one of the main reasons as of why we  
17 knew that we had to be part of this is that our  
18 initial focus as an organization with military  
19 started back in 2006, very early on the main focus  
20 wasn't providing health care services but we knew  
21 early on that in order to make it effective we had to  
22 incorporate and make all the services available to  
23 the veteran, to the family as well in, in a span of  
24 over a decade we grew to clinical centers of  
25 excellence and all these resources, the one thing

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2 that we couldn't do was effectively connect those  
3 individuals who needed more than health care  
4 addressing the social economic determinants of health  
5 in those items that we are not good at, right, that  
6 we would like to be better at but we're not good at  
7 so instead of recreating the wheel we wanted to  
8 partner with the town's not for profits in the space  
9 so we can address that because in the way that we see  
10 it you can have a great oncologist or gastrologist  
11 but if you cannot follow your treatment plan and you  
12 don't have the supports around you treatment is not  
13 effective and the way that I see I sat basically  
14 where you sat in 2009 combat veteran three tours,  
15 2009 I was medically discharged three months after I  
16 was discharged three months Tricare dropped me, I had  
17 no idea what I was going to do, right, so I felt I  
18 was left to fend for myself. I believe that this  
19 coordinated network and this collective impact  
20 initiative is a breath of fresh air to those who are  
21 seeking care and more often than not Anthony can tell  
22 you that when you call for one thing and just after  
23 five minutes of a conversation you're realizing that  
24 one need turns to two and three and four so for us  
25 value is important but quality is the key, that is

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2 the issue with the quality matrix, the quality, the  
3 outcome.

4 ANTHONY SILVERA: Did we answer your  
5 question ma'am?

6 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: You did.

7 ANTHONY SILVERA: Okay.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I have a question  
9 for Anthony. So, if someone... if, if some... if a  
10 veteran goes on Vet, Vet Connect and requests  
11 assistance would you be one of the people that return  
12 to respond to them?

13 ANTHONY SILVERA: Yes, sir.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, so it was you  
15 when we did the, the, the test and you responded,  
16 amazing, you were really truly amazing, so I want to  
17 thank you for that.

18 ANTHONY SILVERA: Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yes, it was really  
20 amazing...

21 ANTHONY SILVERA: I'm glad it went well.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I just want to ask  
23 you, I have... we have two more panels coming up, will  
24 you be able to stick around just to listen to those  
25 two panels it shouldn't take long?

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2 ANTHONY SILVERA: Absolutely..

3 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, great, thanks  
4 you so much.

5 ANTHONY SILVERA: Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you.

7 MARY BIER: Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Oh, okay. Coco  
9 Culhane, Kent Eiler, Joe Hunt.

10 [off mic dialogue]

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Hi Coco.

12 COCO CULHANE: Hi, I'm Coco Culhane, the  
13 founder and director of the Veteran Advocacy Project.  
14 I was involved in the core original team in 2013 when  
15 this was just an idea and wanted this more than  
16 anyone in the world I think because we have an entire  
17 staff member who's whole job is just doing referrals  
18 and doing the amazing work that Anthony and his team  
19 do every day but I'm shocked by this hearing so far  
20 because I just think this doesn't work and I think  
21 we've had five years for providers to get involved  
22 and I think one of the problems is something that a  
23 Robin Hood program officer said, in the beginning  
24 which is this relies on a sea of goodwill and there's  
25 no incentive. So, we use this so.. I mean we were so

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2 enthusiastic about it and my team all had to have  
3 accounts and they all had to use it and we found out  
4 we were, you know the number one provider referring  
5 in after we had decided our clients were not a good  
6 fit and this was before it was with Northwell, this  
7 is not a criticism in any way on... it's, it's, it's  
8 the system overall and the... and the environment that  
9 it's operating within in New York City, no one wants  
10 to use a middle man and I've got to say even DVS  
11 sends people to us outside of Vet Connect like... and I  
12 just think if we're spending over a thousand dollars  
13 on average per veteran on this system we need to be  
14 talking about that and we need to be talking about  
15 the outcomes and what's really going on and who's  
16 using the system and what they're using it for  
17 because I know, you know the biggest problem that we  
18 all face as, you know advocates and, and service  
19 providers is housing so we sent someone in and that's  
20 not what the, the system can't build affordable  
21 housing it shouldn't be expected to but we sent  
22 someone in, they got referred to NYCHA to the public  
23 housing waitlist and that's, that's not a good  
24 solution, right and this may have been a couple of  
25 years ago, this is... again I want to say that the

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2 quality work that has come out of the people in the  
3 hub at Northwell is fantastic and so this is not  
4 meant as any kind of comment on them and my intake  
5 staff has worked with them really closely but I  
6 really think we need to be looking at this, what kind  
7 of requests are going in, what's the actual quality  
8 coming out and what are we actually paying for, what  
9 are the tax dollars going towards and why isn't this  
10 something that's integrated into DVS's services,  
11 right, I mean again to be brutally honest like I'm  
12 calling Inez when I need to hook someone up with a  
13 service that I know the city can make happen. So, if,  
14 if someone who has very adamantly believed in the  
15 system and wanted it to work is up here telling you  
16 that I, I think you've got to also look at who's not  
17 in the room. All of the major providers who were  
18 there from the beginning and created this and don't  
19 use it, don't need it and I'm happy... you know if I'm  
20 wrong then great but 583 veterans like, you know we  
21 had... we served over 1,000 veterans in the same amount  
22 of time and we're tiny, right, I don't want to serve...  
23 I mean I didn't want us to go out of business but I  
24 just... I think that we need to really be looking at

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the data and questioning what we're using and how we're using the system. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Coco and I think you hit it on... you hit, you know the nail on... it is important for DVS to get the numbers back to us as well as the kinds of services people are requesting and the results of that and that's one of the things we discussed today so hopefully we'll be able... we'll be able to get it moving forward and I think it would also help to have that meeting with the, the right channels United, United Us and everyone else just to be in the same page and to give those ideas to them so thank you very much Coco.

KENT EILER: Okay. Good morning Chairman Deutsch and good morning to the honorable members of the Committee. My name is Kent Eiler I'm the Project Director at the City Bar Justice Center's Veterans Assistance Project. The City Bar Justice Center has been working with Vet Connect NYC since its inception back when it was still New York Serves, City Bar staff have been trained on the procedures for using Vet Connect's technology platform, attended Vet Connect town hall meetings and regularly interact and correspond with Vet Connect staff. To their credit

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2 the team at the Vet Connect coordination center as  
3 Coco was saying a moment ago has been great at  
4 communicating with us and veterans often speak highly  
5 of the team members when our staff calls to follow up  
6 on a referral that was sent. According to Vet  
7 Connect's data the City Bar has received 171  
8 referrals making us the seventh largest recipient of  
9 referrals in their system. We have noticed an  
10 increase in these referrals since their rebranding  
11 effort, since their relaunch in November the City Bar  
12 has received 73 referrals virtually all of which were  
13 accurately referred. These referrals do turn into  
14 cases that we take on, of the cases the City Bar  
15 accepted for representation this year just under 40  
16 percent started as referrals from Vet Connect.  
17 However, to be clear prior to New York Serves and Vet  
18 Connect the City Bars Veterans Assistance Project  
19 never had difficulty finding and intaking low income  
20 veterans who were desperately in need of our  
21 services. Two percent of the country's 20 million  
22 veterans currently have an appeal pending with the  
23 Department of Veterans Affairs over denied VA  
24 benefits. Applying that same percentage to our city's  
25 veterans and there's no reason not to means there are

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2 approximately 4,000 New York City veterans who at  
3 this very moment have a pending VA appeal. At present  
4 staffing levels the City Bar is able to take on a few  
5 dozen of these cases each year. Because of the  
6 tremendous need it is vital the city closely  
7 scrutinize where its limited resources are spent in  
8 the efficacy of those resources. While it's  
9 impossible to put a price tag on the value of the  
10 referrals received by the veterans Vet Connect has  
11 served that's precisely the daunting task facing this  
12 committee and the city as it balances limited  
13 resources. At present the ongoing annual cost of  
14 referrals, the ticket price of Vet Connect exceeds  
15 the budget by program area for either veteran's  
16 employment or mental health in the FY 2020 DVS  
17 financial plans summary. Anecdotally in my career I  
18 have frequently heard veterans tell me quote, "I need  
19 a lawyer and I need a doctor, I need a job or I need  
20 an apartment" but I have never not once heard a  
21 veteran tell me quote, "could you help me with a  
22 referral, what I really need is a referral". Our  
23 client population is typically stressed and looking  
24 for someone, anyone to do the work at a time when  
25 service providers everywhere are simply maxed out.

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2 While the City Bar Justice Center appreciates the  
3 hard work the coordination center puts in we also  
4 find that the Vet Connect system occasionally makes  
5 the process unnecessarily onerous for veterans, it  
6 would appear the need to report higher number of  
7 veterans assisted incentivizes Vet Connect to  
8 encourage veterans to remain within their platform  
9 sometimes at the expense of practicality. For  
10 instance, if a veteran were to navigate to the Vet  
11 Connect website they could find the City Bar and see  
12 that we provide assistance with the VA benefit  
13 matters then if the veteran determine they could  
14 benefit from our services and clicked on our profile  
15 instead of being directed to our contact information  
16 they would be redirected to a portal encouraging them  
17 to contact Vet Connect so that Vet Connect can be the  
18 one to put them in touch with us adding a layer to  
19 the process. Similarly, when it comes to over the  
20 phone referrals Vet Connect sends the veteran's  
21 information to the service provider but refrains from  
22 also providing the client the service providers  
23 information. Providing both parties with each other's  
24 contact information would be the most practical way  
25 to ensure the veteran receives the information or

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resources they need however, there is the appearance at least to this provider that there are incentives associated with keeping the veteran within Vet Connect's tracking system to prevent this. We understand the interest in a single point of entry for purposes of tracking data, but we believe doing so should not add additional barriers to veterans accessing resources. We hope that there will be efforts to make Vet Connect more efficient and less costly and also that more attention will be paid to supporting the legal service providers who are crucial to helping those veterans denied benefits to appeal. Ultimately, we're all here to help New York's veterans. We at the City Bar Justice Center hope that in the future veterans will be able to access those resources in the most efficient manner possible. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you very

much. So, you're, you're talking about expanding legal, legal service providers so is this only.. is this for the pending VA appeals or do you see that we need legal services in other areas too?

KENT EILER: I, I think Chairman Deutsch

there is... there is a... there is a real need in both

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2 areas but, but where both Miss Culhane and myself  
3 work is specifically as veterans law practitioners  
4 and you're basically talking to really the only game  
5 in town up here when it comes to veteran specific  
6 civil legal services and we both believe that greater  
7 resources put towards veteran specific civil legal  
8 services is desperately needed while also  
9 acknowledging that there are other legal issues that...  
10 such as problems with family law, housing, issues  
11 that are certainly not unique to being a veteran  
12 where veterans also need assistance as well.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, so if  
14 someone... if someone should reach out to Vet Connect  
15 regarding legal help you don't think that there is...  
16 they have sufficient help for those veterans?

17 KENT EILER: We... you want to talk about  
18 your wait list?

19 COCO CULHANE: Yeah, I think... I think the  
20 point is just... and I think this is a whole other  
21 hearing, right, but the core... [cross-talk]

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: We're leading into  
23 the next hearing.

24 COCO CULHANE: Okay, the... for the  
25 specific services that, you know Kent is talking

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about because I... as... if I'm not mistaken the City Bar is the only place for benefits for VA claims, referrals, the VSOs are not in it as far as I know so I would imagine that his backlit... his wait list is quite long and I know our wait list for just upgrades which, which is just one of the things we do is quite long so we work with Vet Connect as best we can to temper expectations of, of veterans.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, my question is if you take your wait list and send them to Vet Connect, right, let's say they're sitting... [cross-talk]

COCO CULHANE: Yeah... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...sitting in the office and you go on Vet Connect and you have... you, you make a request for those services, what, what would happen then?

COCO CULHANE: They come to one of us.

KENT EILER: Yeah, I mean they would probably cross refer them to, to one of... one of us and what we do is when veterans say hey I need a, a lawyer, I think I need a lawyer to help me obtain VA benefits... [cross-talk]

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Uh-huh... [cross-talk]

KENT EILER: ...and they don't want to be placed on a wait list, we will then at the City Bar Justice Center we'll refer them out to VSOs, Veterans Service Organizations that provide those services.

COCO CULHANE: I see Northwell Health shaking their head, so I want to give them a chance to answer.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, so let's... yeah, let's get Northwell here.

COCO CULHANE: I don't... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Come on down, yeah.

[off mic dialogue]

ANTHONY SILVERA: So, just as the borough referral process, right so the veteran reaches Vet Connect as far as legal right now we have five legal providers that are network, NYLAG is the newest one that just came in so there is a long wait list. Essentially what we do is, you know the veteran explains what their need is because legal is one of the needs that we get a lot, we're pretty comfortable with what our providers are able to provide so specifically if it's for service connected

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2 disability, you know we explain to them up front, you  
3 know that there's a wait list so we let them know  
4 exactly what they're going to be in store for if they  
5 still want to press the center or borough, if they  
6 were meeting directly with this veteran without  
7 coming to Vet Connect and they're going for that  
8 particular need then they're not going to necessarily  
9 refer them to us because they've already went  
10 directly to this organization if that makes sense.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, it definitely  
12 makes sense, but it makes sense what you're saying  
13 but it doesn't make sense that a veteran should have  
14 to be in a wait list and maybe not even being taken  
15 care of, right... [cross-talk]

16 COCO CULHANE: So... [cross-talk]

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...so this, this is...  
18 [cross-talk]

19 COCO CULHANE: ...like I say I don't think  
20 that's the... [cross-talk]

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...why... [cross-talk]

22 COCO CULHANE: ...I don't think that...  
23 [cross-talk]

24 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...this is why its  
25 important to have these conversations... [cross-talk]

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ANTHONY SILVERA: Right... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...just to see what the loopholes are and this way we could sit down and see how to better, you know service the veterans in the future. Yeah, you wanted to say something Coco.

COCO CULHANE: No, sorry, I was just going to say it's not Northwell's fault... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I'm sorry?

COCO CULHANE: ...it's not Vet Connect's fault that we have wait lists, that's all, I'm just sort of defending because... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Oh, so... [cross-talk]

COCO CULHANE: ...do a good job.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, so you know one thing, I'm sorry, does Vet Connect have a wait list, you just said... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: No sir, I was talking about the wait list for them to be able to... [cross-talk]

COCO CULHANE: For us... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: ...meet with an attorney to get assistance...

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, so there's a wait... so, you have a wait list, does Vet Connect have a wait list?

ANTHONY SILVERA: We don't have a wait list.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, so you have amongst the, the five legal providers you, you don't have a wait list then? So, if, if they were to refer their wait list to Vet Connect what would happen then?

ANTHONY SILVERA: So, sir let me just make sure that I'm clear as far as the wait list goes, right so there's a particular service type and it's getting assistance to apply for service connected to civility for example... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: ...which is one of the main ones that we get, our main provider that does that has a long wait list because if they're working with so many veterans, right, we can send a referral right away as long as they meet the eligibility criteria to do the referral but the challenges with the provider not having enough attorneys and not having enough staff to be able to take that on.

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2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay... [cross-talk]

3 ANTHONY SILVERA: So, we don't have a  
4 wait list per se...

5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Because you send  
6 the wait list to them.

7 ANTHONY SILVERA: Because we send the  
8 referral... [cross-talk]

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, yes, you  
10 send... [cross-talk]

11 ANTHONY SILVERA: ...to them... [cross-talk]

12 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...the referral to  
13 them and then they... [cross-talk]

14 ANTHONY SILVERA: ...the challenge is to  
15 have the... [cross-talk]

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...have a wait list...  
17 [cross-talk]

18 ANTHONY SILVERA: ...there's more veterans  
19 than there... [cross-talk]

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, so how, how do  
21 we measure between Vet Connect and the provider that  
22 you don't keep on sending veterans over and... only to  
23 be on the wait list and... [cross-talk]

24 ANTHONY SILVERA: So... [cross-talk]

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: ...it could be for a year, two years, who knows.

ANTHONY SILVERA: So, one is they tell us when they're at capacity... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And what happens then... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: ...and we stop sending referrals.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: But what happens then, so they have a wait list and if they have one person on the wait list, right, then they're already backed up, right? So, they bounce back to you and they say listen we don't have any, any spots right now so we're sending it back to you, what do you... what does Vet Connect do then?

ANTHONY SILVERA: So, sir we take care of it on the frontend, right, so we're explaining to the veteran when they're reaching out to us what the provider services are and that we let them know up front that there's a wait list, if they want us to send this referral that it may take some months before they're able to meet with an attorney. Now the organization is going to do an intake with them right

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away to really see if they're eligible because we just do the... kind of the basics, right... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: ...the provider has more of the details. So, we explain to them up front that for this particular service there's normally a wait list with the organization because they have so many clients that they're trying to satisfy so then it's up to the veteran at that point if they want us to do the referral, most of them are okay with it because they know it's a process anyway for them to actually apply for a service connected to... but there are cases where we get some veterans who at that point say that they are not comfortable with going with the wait list and those are the ones that we give to veteran services, we recommend they reach out to veteran service organizations... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, so... [cross-talk]

ANTHONY SILVERA: ...be faster... [cross-talk]

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, what do we need to do to close this loophole?

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ANTHONY SILVERA: I think that's a good question for... we just need more resources sir.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: More... okay, so that's... is this... is this like one of the services that you see the highest wait list for legal services?

ANTHONY SILVERA: So, its, it's really more of a question for them sir but it... as far as wait lists...

[off mic dialogue]

ANTHONY SILVERA: Yes... so, I'm hoping to sit down. So, so that, that... again that questions more for the folks that are up here and I think the city at large to discuss about resources, our job is to make the referral, our job is to work as an enterprise to make sure that we have the right providers in the network but I guess what these fine folks are saying right now is that there are a lot of folks that are looking for assistance and they have scarce resources to be able to service all of them and that does create a backlog for those clients that are looking for assistance.

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CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Okay, I have a lot more questions but DVS... I'm not going to call DVS back up here. Yes?

JOHN ROWAN: Can I respond sir?

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, come on down, yeah. Yeah, thank you very much, thanks.

JOHN ROWAN: It's alright, I'm up here with old friends so... my name is John Rowan, I'm the National President of Vietnam Veterans of America, I'm also probably the senior member of the Veterans Advisory Board of the City of New York, I'm also a former service rep who actually did work in the veterans appeals process stuff for several years in the early twos, yeah, thanks, the Sergeant at Arms is yelling at me. Anyway, I used to be involved at the City Council too but the bottom line is this the New York State Division of Veterans Affairs is about the only functioning operation that does fairly substantial numbers of claims in the city of New York and unfortunately the State Division of Veterans Affairs process is good but the problem is they don't have enough people especially in the city of New York. The VSOs quite honestly are very, very diminished in their capacity so over the last 15, 20

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2 years. My organization we had a couple of people who  
3 have been doing some work and it was very nice but it  
4 was very minimal, the DA... the disabled American  
5 veterans still has a fairly good operation, VFW has  
6 faded away over the last several years, the Legion  
7 has got some people but they're scattered all around  
8 the country and so while they sit in the board of  
9 veterans appeals office in Lower Manhattan they do  
10 not have a lot of people sitting here doing that kind  
11 of work. They don't need lawyers per se but you don't  
12 need heavily trained people to be able to do appeals  
13 work, it is quasi legal, the VA is like... not  
14 surprisingly we've got the, the worst regulations you  
15 ever seen in your life especially when you're dealing  
16 with all the different aspects of both mental health  
17 and physical health issues faced by veterans. So, all  
18 of these folks here are doing some wonderful work but  
19 there's such limited capacity because unfortunately  
20 unlike the State Division of Veteran Affairs I don't  
21 even know what their budget is today. The one fault  
22 that we've had with the City Division of Veterans  
23 Affairs... Veteran Services, excuse me, is that they  
24 haven't developed that capacity at all to provide  
25 veteran reps, veteran service reps, veteran service

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2 officer, you got a lot of different titles but it's  
3 basically the same thing, so the ability to take a  
4 veteran or a family member and go through the  
5 processes involved with filing for a claim for  
6 disability. I myself by the way.. I'm a... I'm a 100  
7 percent disabled basically from agent orange  
8 illnesses including diabetes and other issues so it..  
9 and, and that didn't occur right away, it took me 20  
10 years to get to that point so I, I really love all  
11 these people who do all this great work up here,  
12 they've been doing it for a long time but they need  
13 support and I think the city and your committee would  
14 be really good to take a look at the whole aspect of  
15 how the city and the state need to work together.  
16 What, what needs to be understood and I've been  
17 trying to tell politicians this for years, it.. at all  
18 kinds of levels, believe it or not a service rep,  
19 some person, an individual in an office working with  
20 clients in the VA to help them get benefits can  
21 probably reap anywhere from ten to 100 times their  
22 salary on an annual basis bringing in tax dollars  
23 into the city of New York to the tunes of millions of  
24 dollars. If you go to the VA and ask them how many  
25 millions of dollars come into the city of New York

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every year to disabled veterans you will be very, very shocked, it's an extensive number. The problem is it should be a lot more number because as was mentioned earlier with some of the folks and even the Council Woman and her husband coming back from the service, he had to face a differential... did he get retired from the military?

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: No.

JOHN ROWAN: No, he just got put out as a disabled veteran and had to go to the VA for his disability, correct?

COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: And we're still struggling on that percentage.

JOHN ROWAN: Yes, see and that's... the Council Woman can tell you what it's like to have to go through that bureaucracy. So, if I... and, and I really can't fault DVS for this because they, they don't have the capacity, they've never had the capacity and it would probably take upwards of five to ten million easily to set up a good program here in the city of New York without doubt, I would say, right? Easily and maybe more. I mean it would be interesting to see what the State Division spends on an annual basis in the state of New York and then

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2 parlay that down to New York City. So, I mean... and  
3 again I really encourage all the work everybody is  
4 doing but I think the city and the City Council and  
5 your Committee needs to look at what it takes to make  
6 an investment in the veterans in the city of New York  
7 to bring in the income that they need and that the  
8 city could use because I can tell you it really  
9 isn't... it's pretty darn good when I get my, my check  
10 every month as 100 percent disabled veteran of a tax  
11 free check of over 3,300 dollars a month. I can tell  
12 you it's more than my retirement pay from the... from  
13 the city of New York for which I retired 17 years ago  
14 so it's a substantial amount of money, it's worth the  
15 investment, I encourage the Council to take a look at  
16 that.

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you John. So,  
18 the next hearing we're going to speaking about the  
19 gap of services and how we can fill that in because  
20 this is... this something that really I wasn't aware...  
21 wasn't even aware of that people are waiting and we  
22 have such long... a long waiting periods for people  
23 waiting, veterans to get assistance so that's the  
24 next hearing agenda so I want to thank you for  
25 testifying and we're going to get to my friend here.

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JOHN ROWAN: Sorry.

COCO CULHANE: No problem.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: We don't have a...  
John we don't have a system here so...

JOE HUNT: Thank you Chairperson Deutsch and members of the Committee on Veterans for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding Vet Connect NYC. My name is Joe Hunt, I'm a US Army veteran and I serve as Director of the Veterans Mental Health Coalition. The coalition is administered by vibrant emotional health formerly known as the New York Mental Health Association. For more than 50 years vibrant has provided direct services, public education and advocacy to address the needs of New Yorkers living with behavioral health needs. In addition to administering Veterans Mental Health Coalition, vibrant also provides training and technical assistance as well as backup call center support to the veteran's crisis line. The Veterans Mental Health Coalition is to... goal is to improve access to and the quality of behavioral health services to military... to the military connected community including active duty, service members, veterans, their families and caregivers. The

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2 coalition is made up of 874 individuals representing  
3 about 370 organizations including housing, legal  
4 services and benefits and a wide variety of other  
5 veteran serving agencies including federal, state,  
6 city, government and educational institutions. The  
7 interesting thing is that although our name is the  
8 Veterans Mental Health Coalition, our membership is  
9 80, 80 percent of our members are civilian and non-  
10 mental health providers seeking information about the  
11 culture and the unique needs of the military  
12 connected community in order to become more effective  
13 at delivering the services. As I've testified  
14 previously a rand corporation research study funded  
15 by the New York State Health Foundation reported that  
16 more than half of all service members returning to  
17 civilian life in New York State return with  
18 psychological injuries or substance abuse issues yet  
19 only one third ever seek treatment. There are at  
20 least two primary reasons why veterans forsake their  
21 mental health; first, despite increased efforts to  
22 combat the stigma associated with mental health and  
23 mental health treatment, fear about getting treatment  
24 remains considerable. Second, the need for other  
25 services are often at the top of the veteran's

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2 priority list; housing, employment and legal services  
3 for example. In our estimation the result of these  
4 two factors is that approximately 67 of 100 veterans  
5 with a probable diagnosis of PTSD, clinical  
6 depression or substance use are seeking services from  
7 non-mental health providers rather than connecting  
8 directly with behavioral health treatment centers.  
9 The question is what steps can be taken to change  
10 this dynamic. One answer is to connect and share data  
11 about the number of requests and types of services  
12 that are being requested, we know that Vet Connect is  
13 the considerable resource for information referrals  
14 and case coordination that can link New York City's  
15 military connected community who are aware of their  
16 services to service providers across a wide variety  
17 of sectors including mental health and substance use  
18 treatment. And I'm sure we all agree that the  
19 inclusion of more qualified providers in Vet Connect  
20 network will enhance the benefit to the community. To  
21 that end the Veterans Mental Health Coalition is  
22 working with Vet Connect and with IVMF to develop  
23 educational events for our coalition members to  
24 inform them of the benefits, qualifications, and  
25 process for becoming members of the Vet Connect

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2 community. I cannot overstate it particularly at... in  
3 light of this discussion about capacity, I cannot  
4 overstate Vet Connect's potential to provide DVS and  
5 the provider community with valuable data that will  
6 enable us to make informed decisions, develop  
7 strategies to increase the number of veterans in my  
8 case, in my interest receiving mental health and  
9 substance use treatment and measure the effectiveness  
10 of those strategies. It would also provide us all  
11 with information about the demand and we can look at  
12 the communities and see what, what additional  
13 capacities are required or what additional funding to  
14 expand these organizations might be. In order to  
15 support New York City's effort to effectively serve  
16 our community it is essential to conduct  
17 communications and outreach campaigns to the  
18 community that reduce the stigma and fear associated  
19 with behavioral health and it's treatment, promote  
20 the convenience of Vet Connect NYC to access  
21 services, train non-mental health providers in  
22 veterans mental health first aid and encourage them  
23 to make referrals through the network and to share  
24 information with us all, we need to know the number  
25 of requests received by Vet Connect for services by

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2 type of service especially mental health and  
3 substance use referrals as well as identify the  
4 number of provider to provider referrals within the  
5 Vet Connect community. Vet Connect's potential to  
6 inform the city's decision making is critical, with  
7 the information... with this information we'll be able  
8 to effectively out... develop outreach campaigns and  
9 training curricula and measure the outcomes of our  
10 efforts. The net result of our collaborative effort  
11 will ensure that those we serve receive appropriate  
12 services and supports in order to build a, a...  
13 productive and meaningful lives. Thank you, Chairman  
14 Deutsch and members of the Committee on Veterans, I'm  
15 happy to answer any questions.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Joe. So,  
17 thanks for everything you do, and I think the next  
18 agenda we'll be able to hopefully get some answers to  
19 these questions and see what we need to do as a city.  
20 I just want to thank my colleagues and, and Alicka  
21 for the... for being... for being able to increase the  
22 veterans initiative in the New York City Council to  
23 2.8 million dollars that goes to many non for profits  
24 and that's helpful and we're going to be having a  
25 roundtable with all of the non for profits and Joe

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2 Bello is going to be setting it up, the same we did  
3 last year and I'm also looking forward to having a  
4 roundtable with all of the people involved Northwell  
5 and United Us and, and IVMF and others who are  
6 instrumental in getting these.. this data to Vet  
7 Connect and being able to share all that information  
8 working with DVS so working together I think we could  
9 accomplish a lot, we need to work together so stay  
10 tuned. Yeah, so thank you very much. We have one more  
11 panel, I'm just going to pull up.. okay, John Rowan..  
12 oh, okay, I'm sorry. John, I could tell you that's  
13 not right.. okay, Rhonda Sherwin, Vadim Panasyuk,  
14 Matthew Ryba and Joseph Euro [sp?]. We got four  
15 chairs, okay.

16 VADIM PANASYUK: Check, hello. Hello  
17 Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee  
18 on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America  
19 and our more than 45,000 members I would like to  
20 thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.  
21 My name is Vadim Panasyuk, I'm a New Yorker,  
22 naturalized citizen, an Iraq war veteran with two  
23 tours in Iraq with third infantry division and I'm a  
24 master level social worker working as a, a senior  
25 manager of Client Services with IAVA's rapid response

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2 referral program or RRRP for short. RRRP is a, a high  
3 tech, high touch referral service for veterans and  
4 their families with a comprehensive and complete case  
5 management component. We assist veterans of all eras  
6 with any discharge status worldwide in confronting  
7 significant challenges like unemployment, financial  
8 or legal struggles, homelessness and mental health  
9 related issues. To date RRRP has served almost 10,000  
10 veterans and family members nationwide and over 1,000  
11 in New York City alone providing critical support and  
12 resources to ensure the city's veteran's needs are  
13 effectively met. After 15 years IAVA has become the  
14 preferred empowerment organization for post 911  
15 veterans. While our members are spread out through  
16 the nation, we are proud to say that our national  
17 headquarters is located here in New York City. Since  
18 it's beginning IAVA has fought for and has been  
19 successful in advocating for policies that are able  
20 to meet the needs of our newest generation of  
21 veterans which includes our advocacy for the  
22 creation, proper funding and oversight of the  
23 Department of Veteran Services, DVS. DVS has enormous  
24 potential and its establishment was a historic moment  
25 for veterans of this city. DVS can serve to

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2 significantly streamline access and improve service  
3 delivery to many of the most critical veteran  
4 specific programs and resources already available  
5 here. Today we are here to report what we're seeing  
6 on the ground as it relates to Vet Connect NYC to  
7 better inform this committee's decisions as they  
8 relate to the oversight of this critical program as  
9 it continues to take shape and deeper integrate into  
10 the services infrastructure of our great city. To  
11 date RRRP has assisted 168 Vet Connect NYC clients,  
12 this includes NY Serves era clients as well. During  
13 the last four years at IAVA I've had the pleasure to  
14 work with many at Vet Connect NYC and have found them  
15 to be mission driven, very responsive and easy to  
16 work with. Their diligence and follow up with  
17 providers to ensure services are being delivered and  
18 their client's needs are met is truly impressive. Vet  
19 Connect NYC continues to stay proactive in  
20 collaborating with programs like ours by scheduling  
21 annual meetings between RRRP and Vet Connect senior  
22 staff, this includes higher level decision makers  
23 intending to illicit comprehensive feedback and  
24 ensure optimal cooperation. These meetings do bear  
25 fruit. For example, for the last few years we have

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2 been experiencing challenges in seamlessly receiving  
3 referrals, we're happy to report that due to wide  
4 open channels of communication between our team and  
5 Vet Connect NYC staff we've been able to better  
6 integrate Vet Connect NYC referrals into our day to  
7 day workflow. The way their intake is structured  
8 helps us to not duplicate the work already done  
9 because we can clearly see what other services the  
10 veteran is receiving. However, other challenges  
11 persist. We view the requirement to use Vet Connect  
12 NYC software to participate in the network to be a  
13 barrier limiting the number of types of programs  
14 available through Vet Connect NYC. Furthermore, we do  
15 not find the internal referral component  
16 comprehensive enough as it relates to programs and  
17 services represented there. The increase in the  
18 amount of digital paperwork needed to sync to the  
19 work of our case managing... case management team and  
20 Vet Connect NYC continues to be a hinderance as well.  
21 Another clear deficit we can see is the lack of a  
22 comprehensive case management component and over  
23 reliance on programs like ours to make connections to  
24 resources not available in the Vet Connect NYC  
25 network or resources. This includes various catholic

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2 charities around the city, certain housing programs  
3 as well as programs headquartered in other states  
4 which, which deliver emergency financial assistance,  
5 employment counseling and legal services on a  
6 national scope thus further limiting options Vet  
7 Connect NYC staff have when working to meet their  
8 client's needs. We're looking to DVS to adequately,  
9 adequately fund and expand Vet Connect NYC, we  
10 support the programs, they deliver critical and  
11 relevant services to veterans in need quickly and  
12 effectively. After all our own RRRP... our own RRRP  
13 team has been pioneering this approach since 2012,  
14 we've been doing it on a national scale with fewer  
15 resources and a smaller team. While our approach is  
16 similar the deficiencies, I have mentioned so far are  
17 stunting Vet Connect NYC's growth, deeper integration  
18 into veteran services infrastructure in New York City  
19 and nationally and ultimately limit potential of this  
20 program. As Vet Connect NYC continues to find it's  
21 footing as a platform, we encourage this committee to  
22 provide them with the oversight and tools needed to  
23 be successful. We are hopeful that DVS will be able  
24 to find solutions to these issues as it continues to  
25 implement various program quality enhancements.

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2 Members of this committee thank you again for the  
3 opportunity to share IAVA's views on these issues  
4 today, I look forward to answering any of your  
5 questions.

6 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Vadim.  
7 So, when you receive a referral from Vet Connect do  
8 you see an entire history of that referral or you  
9 only see what the issue of that referral?

10 VADIM PANASYUK: We can see where they've  
11 been referred to, what other services they're  
12 receiving but also this helps us identify other areas  
13 where we can be more helpful and to provide  
14 additional support.

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, how does that  
16 work, so you get to see the whole history?

17 VADIM PANASYUK: No, so once you get the,  
18 the referral there are a number of fields and we can  
19 see what other providers they're engaging with and  
20 things like that.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Interesting, okay.  
22 Alright, thank you, thanks for everything.

23 RHONDA SHERWIN: I don't have prepared  
24 remarks but I'm talking... my name is Rhonda Sherwin  
25 and I appreciate the, the opportunity to speak in

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2 front of the committee. I was a service provider  
3 under NYC Vet Connect for three years starting in  
4 2016 as a veteran's financial coach. The program that  
5 I was under was funded by the consumer financial  
6 protection bureau administered by the armed forces  
7 service corporation. I was the only veterans  
8 financial coach and that, that service was exclusive  
9 to my services because I wasn't selling any products  
10 and I was just helping veterans with their personal  
11 finance issues namely budgeting, raising credit  
12 scores, building credit and all the challenges upon  
13 transition to New York City in, in managing their  
14 personal finance. As many of the people know in this  
15 room that program ended in March of 2019 and therefor  
16 my affiliation with New... NYC Vet Connect ended as  
17 well, I'm not sure if any of my services have been  
18 replaced but I know that to quote Coco I was the only  
19 game in town for three years. I had some referrals  
20 from NYC... I'm going to speak from a personal  
21 experience, when I started in 2016 I was given a desk  
22 and a phone and find the veterans who need financial  
23 coaching and NYC Vet Connect was handled by my  
24 predecessor who was at the... from the program around  
25 2015 I think till 2016. Through the years I had some

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2 referrals from NYC Vet Connect but most of my  
3 hundreds of clients that I saw was me really going  
4 out to the organizations to find the people and when  
5 I asked them about NYC Vet Connect many of them  
6 didn't know so I considered myself a personal  
7 ambassador for, for NYC Vet Connect but I think that  
8 the real problem is just the intermediary, you know  
9 having it function as an intermediary, you know  
10 veterans just want to see like if you need help with  
11 employment or housing I would give them, you know a  
12 card, a number, call this person, call that person  
13 rather than me going to a portal and sign up and I  
14 think that's why there's a low number in terms of ten  
15 percent of network providers which is... I didn't  
16 realize it was that low but I'm, I'm, I was one of  
17 those, you know I knew... I knew other people that  
18 were... that could help the veteran and so rather than  
19 say well go to a portal and sign up, you know here's  
20 a card, here's a number you'll get a direct call with  
21 somebody and I think that's, that's the drawback as I  
22 see it. The... you know the way veterans really want to  
23 talk to somebody, they want to call somebody and have  
24 a direct contact with them that's what I was doing,  
25 you know the one to one coaching rather than give,

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2 you know... you know referrals and you know other  
3 people... you know other websites and other, you know  
4 organizations, they really wanted names of people to  
5 talk to. So, overall, you know the people at NYC Vet  
6 Connect were terrific and I know a lot of people, I'm  
7 echoing that... you know that voice as well, very easy  
8 to work with, good follow up but I couldn't rely on  
9 just those referrals to keep my practice going. Thank  
10 you.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Rhonda,  
12 thank you.

13 MATTHEW RYBA: Thanks. Good morning  
14 Chairman Deutsch, members of the council, thank you  
15 for taking the time to hear these testimonies today.  
16 My name is Matthew Ryba, I'm a Marine corps combat  
17 veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who served six tours  
18 over the course of ten years. I'm currently the  
19 Outreach and Education Director for New York  
20 Presbyterian's Military Family Wellness Center. As  
21 you know most recent data collected from community  
22 surveys in the US Department of Veteran Affairs  
23 states that there are roughly 220,000 military  
24 veterans living in the five boroughs of New York.  
25 Recent studies have also shown that of those veterans

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2 15 to 30 percent carry a diagnosis of PTSD or major  
3 depressive disorder and although publicly available  
4 treatment options such as the veteran's  
5 administration healthcare network provide invaluable  
6 resources to this community about 50 percent of  
7 veterans refuse or don't qualify for VA services.  
8 While their family members are usually excluded from  
9 accessing these services altogether. Our clinic at  
10 New York Presbyterian was established in 2016 at  
11 Columbia University Medical Center and Weill Cornell  
12 Medicine and seeks to bridge this treatment divide by  
13 providing cost free evidence-based assessment and  
14 treatment to local area veterans, active duty service  
15 members and adult family members. Since our inception  
16 the Military Family Well, Wellness Center has  
17 prioritized collaboration with regional, public and  
18 private institutions seeking to compliment existing  
19 resources rather than to compete and try to replace  
20 them. One important community collaborator in our  
21 mission to provide these mental health resources to  
22 the veteran and military families of New York has  
23 been Vet Connect New York formerly NY Serves. Over  
24 the last three years our center has served hundreds  
25 of New York City veterans conducting 379 phone

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2 screens, 294 mental health intake assessments and  
3 enrolling 244 veterans and military family members  
4 into our patient care. The primary conditions that we  
5 treat are PTSD, major depression and anxiety  
6 disorders as well as adjustment disorders. Both of  
7 our clinical sites; Columbia Research Center and  
8 Weill Cornell Program for anxiety and traumatic  
9 stress are in network providers on Vet Connect New  
10 York. Since our clinics have been registered as  
11 providers and this is going back to 2016 including  
12 the previous New York Serves we've had close to 50  
13 patient referrals from Vet Connect New York City and  
14 30 of the cases of which we were able to accept for  
15 assessment or treatment. Although this number may not  
16 seem high, it makes up for roughly ten percent of our  
17 total load and mental health is just one of the many  
18 categories of resources available on Vet Connect NYC  
19 and one that is not very often sought after by  
20 comparison of some of the other categories of  
21 service. With that being said we at the Military  
22 Family Wellness Center feel that it's important to  
23 highlight that both of our clinics along with many of  
24 the other service providers listed on Vet Connect NYC  
25 are nonprofit organizations and many who struggle to

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2 find funding in order to continue serving the  
3 veterans community of New York. While Vet Connect NYC  
4 serves as an important... serves an important purpose  
5 of connecting veterans to resources that they need,  
6 it's the nonprofit organizations providing veteran  
7 services that are equally in need of support in order  
8 to be able to continue to offer these resources. The  
9 challenges facing military families are enormous and  
10 although the VA continues to provide most of the care  
11 thousands of individuals seeking service-related  
12 mental health treatment in the New York region do not  
13 receive it. The Military Family Wellness Center has  
14 established a record of excellence in addressing  
15 these gaps in service and through focus on easy  
16 access, privacy and high-quality care we've become a  
17 recognized and valued resource for local military  
18 family community. With the help of local government  
19 leaders and community collaborators like Vet Connect  
20 NYC we hope to expand our scope of service and  
21 provide vital treatment to this highly valued but  
22 very underserved population. Council Members thank  
23 you for your time and I'm happy to answer any  
24 questions.

25 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you Matthew.

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2 [off mic dialogue]

3 JOSEPH EURO: Good morning or afternoon,  
4 I haven't checked my watch in a while didn't know  
5 exactly where we're at but thank you Chairman Deutsch  
6 and also the Committee members, I'd also like to  
7 thank you for your dedication to veterans and their  
8 families. So, I'm a psychologist and currently work  
9 at the VA's VISN 2, Mental Illness Research,  
10 Education and Clinical Center out of the James J.  
11 Peters Veteran Affairs Medical Center in the Bronx  
12 with a focus on suicide prevention, I'm currently  
13 being onboarded as a Director of Education of  
14 clinical practice for VISN 2 region consisting of New  
15 York and, and also New Jersey. So, I'm the principle  
16 investigator for two VA national programs. One is a  
17 veteran cultural competence training in which we  
18 train nonveteran providers, college faculty and staff  
19 and community leaders across the nation to better  
20 serve veterans and their families and the other  
21 program that I helped to lead is a sponsorship  
22 program for veterans. So, at, at my core I am an  
23 infantry man and also a disabled veteran, I graduated  
24 from West Point in 1998 and spent 20 years in the  
25 infantry of four deployments to Afghanistan before

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2 retiring last year. My first deployment was within,  
3 within months of 9/11 with the second range of  
4 battalion in Afghanistan. During that deployment and  
5 others to follow New York City stood out as a beacon  
6 of resilience and hope to me and also other service  
7 members, an entire nation. As a result of 19 years of  
8 war and many other stressors there have been many  
9 significant and negative impacts upon my fellow  
10 comrades and also myself. My most difficult  
11 deployment to... was in 2006 after I had soldiers under  
12 my command and also my best friend was killed. I was  
13 back here in New York City after the deployment  
14 studying at Columbia University before going back to  
15 West Point to be an assistant professor. I felt alone  
16 in the city and didn't know where to turn for  
17 services and one of the most anxiety provoking times  
18 of my life was waiting in that waiting room because I  
19 was all alone and I didn't feel prepared for the  
20 emotional strain that was... that was awaiting me and  
21 for the first time I, I didn't feel competent and I  
22 felt alone and isolated and very thankfully, you know  
23 my services there at that VA vet center saved my life  
24 and also put me on this current path and trajectory  
25 that I'm on right now. So, but many service members

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2 are very reluctant to seek needed mental health care,  
3 and this contributes to the highest rate of suicide  
4 among our youngest veterans with the rate of suicide  
5 among 18 to 34-year olds doubling from 2006 to the  
6 current rate. The rates are even higher for those who  
7 don't seek the services that we're talking about  
8 today, it's, it's an epidemic and there's no other  
9 way to put it and it... and it's the greatest  
10 significant rise in suicide that, that we... that we  
11 really have ever seen at the VA and this troubling  
12 trend led to the president issuing an executive order  
13 on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019 just a couple short months ago  
14 with the call for federal agencies to work closer  
15 with local governments, academia, private, nonprofit  
16 entities to, to assist the transition of service  
17 members. There also was another executive order last  
18 year focused on suicide prevention in that key  
19 critical one year after transition so that's when  
20 this youngest population is the most vulnerable  
21 unfortunately. And it's very serendipitous that DVS  
22 and Syracuse University, IVMF have already been  
23 conducting extensive work in this field. The, the  
24 sponsored program that I lead regarding program  
25 evaluation and training across the nation for the..

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2 for the VA helps to ease the transition for service  
3 members by recreating a program that they're very  
4 familiar with within the military and that's a  
5 permanent change of station sponsorship program, when  
6 they go from one military, military installation to  
7 another and my last job in the military was an  
8 infantry battalion commander where I managed our own  
9 PCS sponsorship program and we saw the program as  
10 easing their transitioning by helping them to access  
11 necessary programs and receive one on one support at  
12 their new installation but unfortunately when service  
13 members execute a expiration term of service or  
14 retire there aren't similar individuals assigned as  
15 being responsible for their transition into their  
16 home towns with service members also losing their  
17 benefits of military leadership, comradery, support  
18 and structure. These losses can cause transitioning  
19 service members to experience increased transition  
20 stress, a decrease in the sense of purpose and an  
21 elevated risk for suicide and other mental health  
22 concerns in the civilian community. So, that's why  
23 myself and also those of us in the MIRECC collaborate  
24 very closely with entities within the Department of  
25 Defense, Syracuse University, the IVMF, DVS and

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2 nonprofits most specifically American corporate  
3 partners to expand the concept of this ETO  
4 sponsorship with Vet Connect NYC. So, I  
5 wholeheartedly believe that this Vet, Vet Connect NYC  
6 almost is like the new unit that the service members  
7 are transitioning to that is so much... so much needed  
8 and I feel that working with the ETO sponsor and Vet  
9 Connect we hypothesis that they will be able to  
10 overcome stigma and access to the needed care that  
11 they need. It's been very important to the program  
12 that the VA services, our list is vetted network  
13 providers such as the vet centers that I sought care  
14 at because I don't want any other service members to  
15 experience the hardship and isolation I did after my  
16 last... one of my last deployments in 2006 so with the  
17 initial work in New York City with Vet Connect NYC  
18 has become a beacon of resilience and hope for other  
19 cities regarding a potential way to mitigate the  
20 suicide risks that our youngest veterans face and I  
21 look forward to continued work with IVMF, DVS and the  
22 Vet Connect NYC team to help even more transitioning  
23 service members and as a veteran and a VA employee  
24 I'm more than willing to, to help in whatever way  
25 this committee can be of service and if you're

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2 interested I also gave you a paper that we wrote, a  
3 scholarly journal paper that's recently accepted,  
4 going to be published in a military journal, a  
5 special edition, edition on transitioning service  
6 members that talks about the role and the importance  
7 of DVS, the importance of Vet Connect NYC and the  
8 theoretical and academic underpinning to kind of  
9 justify what we're talking about today. So, thank you  
10 for your time.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you, thank  
12 you Joseph or Doctor, yeah. So, first of all I admire  
13 the work that you... that you do on behalf of, of  
14 veterans and I'm also trying to like sometimes figure  
15 out, you know we have here in the United States of  
16 America we have like 20 veteran suicides each day so  
17 I'm trying to figure out the numbers of the veteran  
18 suicides here in New York City and we're trying to  
19 get those reports but I also I submitted a bill in  
20 the New York City Council that if there is a veteran  
21 suicide here in New York City it must be reported so  
22 this way we have those numbers without trying to  
23 scramble and to figure out how many there are because  
24 we need to see the scope of that this way we could..  
25 we could better address, you know veterans who have

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PTSD, depression or any other type of mental health issue. So, this is extremely important and by not... by knowing the suicide rates we could better grapple... take... have a handle on, on what resources we need to continue putting in so I want to thank you and then for the work that you do and I'm looking forward to working very closely with you..

JOSEPH EURO: Yes, sir..

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, thank you. Any questions my colleague, no? Okay, so with that said the meeting.. I want to thank everyone for coming out today, I know you have other things to do but this is an important issue so I really want to thank everyone, the advocates, everyone who testified and I also want to thank the press, I'm sure there's other stuff that you need to report on so I want to thank the press for being here today and for reporting on veteran issues here in New York City so with that the meeting is now adjourned.

[gavel]

C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date

September 25, 2019