



**Testimony of NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)  
New York City Council Committee on Veterans  
Hearing on The State of Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Halls, as well as Other  
Veterans Services Organizations with Physical Locations  
April 4th, 2023, 1:00 pm**

***Introduction***

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, members of the committee, advocates, and New York City Veterans. My name is James Hendon, and I am honored to serve as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). I am joined today by my colleagues Paul Vallone, Deputy Commissioner of External Affairs, Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner for Policy & Strategic Partnerships, and Tanya Thomas, our Veterans' Care Coordinator and American Legion Post 483 Rosedale/Laurelton, Auxiliary President.

Thank you for providing us this opportunity to discuss the very important topic regarding this city's Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), which provide our community's veterans with essential services such as VA benefits advisors (VBAs), scholarship services, student fellowships, military assistance programs (MAPs), financial assistance for basic needs, various volunteer programs, and, most important to our current goals, housing assistance.

DVS fulfills our core mission by providing New York City's 200,000 veterans with essential services and programs focused on pivotal areas such as economic empowerment, housing security, benefits advisement, health and wellness services, and culture. Through DVS outreach, we have identified and received contact information for more than 100,000 veterans, enabling our agency to provide updates for various events, services, and other opportunities within their respective communities.

***Background***

It is important to keep in mind throughout this hearing that these organizations are ran independently from DVS, part of our mission in supporting VSOs is to connect the organizations with agencies which they may need assistance from. However, for the most part, these organizations are not-for-profit organizations who do not have paid staff, and therefore do not have adequate access or experience in accessing governmental agencies when they encounter issues which may require governmental assistance. We remain an available asset to them for assistance, and throughout our meeting today you will hear testimony on how DVS does assist these organizations on a frequent basis.

As a brief overview for your situational awareness, American Legions and Veterans of Foreign Wars Posts are two of the larger VSOs in the nation. Initially established, these organizations were instrumental in advocating for the creation of the Veterans Administration, creating GI Bill benefits for returning WWII veterans, and establishing the National Cemetery System. Today, these efforts continue, and these organizations, along with the various other veteran organizations, remain fighting for improved services and rights for veterans. Though services provided by these organizations are critical to the veteran community, many organizations remain underfunded. Later in this testimony, you will hear about our agency's efforts to assist our local organizations, though many holes are left to fill.

As the daily needs and challenges that each of the VSOs here in New York City change, so does the level of support that our staff at DVS provides. Later you will hear testimony from Tanya Thomas, who has served in her local Legion Post as she continues to provide support for DVS and is able to share her experiences on a personal level. This volunteer work helps to give a boots on the ground approach that the individuals within DVS are proud to provide. As the various challenges facing local chapters of each VSO change, particularly in the ever-changing post-pandemic world, these relationships become more necessary and apparent. For the benefit of the organizations and persons who are present today, perhaps for the first time, I would like to give a summary of these initiatives.

The NYC Department of Veterans' Services has several initiatives to support the city's VSO's, including but not limited to:

- **The Final Honors Program:** The Final Honors Program ensuring that every eligible unclaimed and indigent veteran decedent is given a dignified burial with military honors at a national cemetery. Wherein partnership with the Chief Medical Examiner Office, the New York State American Legion, and several local funeral homes, DVS facilitated over 200 burials in fiscal year 2022.
- **Mission: VetCheck:** A wellness initiative that allows volunteers to make supportive check-in calls to New York City veterans. Volunteers provide their peers with vital information on essential public services, COVID-19 resources and testing locations, and online mental health support. Through various partnerships with veteran service organizations like United War Veterans' Council, NY Hope for the Warriors, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 528, American Legion Post 422, American Legion Post 398, Catholic War Veterans, The 715 Veterans' Association Inc., Vietnam Veterans' of American Post 126, and the National Association of Black Military Women – Brooklyn Chapter.
- **Veteran Benefits Services:** In 2020, accredited DVS staff members began helping NYC veterans and their families process Veterans Affairs (VA) claims. Since the inception of the program, DVS has assisted veterans submit over 300 claims to the VA for a range of disability and pension needs.
- **VetConnectPro:** In 2021, DVS launched VetConnectPro, an employment tool designed to help veterans find employment, professional mentorship, and a wide range of resources available in the "MyCity" Dashboard. Within this dashboard, the system uses every user's profile information to make available their nearest American Legion and VFW post. Connecting over 80 posts across the 5-boroughs with approximately 700 veterans using the system.
- **The Veterans Voices Project:** DVS' oral history project designed to preserve the story of NYC's veteran community for which a dozen of our stories come directly from service-members who currently serve in a VSO or have served in a VSO prior to passing away.
- **DVS Food Insecurity Initiative:** Through a partnership with HelloFresh and New York State DVS, VFW Post 1548-Springfield Gardens and American Legion Post 483-Laurelton, DVS distributed 28,600 meal kits to Veterans in Southeast Queens.
- **Ending Chronic Veteran Homelessness:** The DVS Housing and Support Services team has housed over 1,000 homeless veterans and stood up an aftercare unit to help ensure that the veterans whom DVS houses remain housed, avoiding a return to housing insecurity.

Lastly, DVS has directly provided \$25,000 in financial assistance through our grant process to help VSOs in need. Specifically, DVS provided grants to VSOs struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic through the generosity of The Bob Woodruff Foundation, History Channel, PenFed Foundation, Steven Siller Tunnel to Towers Foundation, and Richmond County Savings Foundation. Whereas a total of 22 VSOs has been awarded a grant of \$1,136 each to help offset their economic hardships. Organizations who received the grant are listed below.

- American Legion Samuel Young Post 620
- American Legion William Irwin Post 774
- American Legion Memorial Post 1833
- American Legion George P. Davis Post 116
- American Legion McFadden Brothers Post 1380
- VFW Edward F Lukoski Post 7096
- American Legion Colonel Charles Young Post 398
- American Legion Little Neck-Douglaston Post 103
- American Legion Broad Channel Post 1404
- American Legion John F. Prince Post 6478
- American Legion Continental Post 1424
- American Legion Corporal John Rusoff 1632
- American Legion Rosedale Post 483
- American Legion Benjamin Moore Post 1946
- VFW Prince Wynn Post 260
- VFW Edward O. Gourdin Post 5298
- VFW Queenboro Hill Post 3427
- Catholic War Veterans St. Sebastian's Post 870
- American Legion Gold Star Post 1365
- American Legion Cespino-Russo Post 1544
- VFW SGG Michael Ollis Post 9587
- American Legion Henry & Stanley Cichon Post 1578

### ***Conclusion***

I'd like to take this opportunity to share a clear message with our community of Veterans Service Organizations: the New York City Department of Veterans Services remains focused on serving you despite what era or demographic you represent. We hear and recognize the challenges VSOs face today and will do our utmost to make certain you receive any support needed to maintain and expand the footprint each of you have built in every neighborhood and borough of New York City. That is our steadfast commitment. It is an honor and privilege to serve all of you and I thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. We are pleased to address any questions you may have.



## NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

**Tuesday, April 4, 2023, 1:00 p.m.**

**SUBJECT: Oversight - The State of Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Halls, as well as Other Veterans-Services Organizations with Physical Locations.**

Good afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Legal Director and Senior Law Project Director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). VOLS was established in 1984 and our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap.

The Veterans Initiative of the VOLS Senior Law Project strives to empower older New Yorkers who served in the military to age in place with dignity, access their legal rights, and live without fear of homelessness. Our free services assist low-income older veterans in making key decisions about incapacity and end-of-life care by providing Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Health Care Proxies, Livings Wills, and other advance directives. These documents enable our clients to ensure that their dying wishes are fulfilled and that they are able to maintain income and services during their lifetime. We also enable our clients' caregivers to access care and services necessary for our clients and make medical decisions in line with their beliefs. Our guides, fact sheets, workshops, and training are aimed at overcoming confusion about planning for the future. Through this work, we empower older veterans to take charge of their finances, property, and medical care, helping them continue to live in their communities. We provide home and hospital visits for limited mobility clients to ensure that all eligible veterans are able to access our services.

The VOLS Veterans Initiative also provides legal advice on a range of other civil legal issues including landlord tenant matters, access to benefits, consumer matters, and other civil legal needs.

Through our strong community partnerships, the Veterans Initiative also provides support and trainings to social workers, health care professionals, and family caregivers. We work closely with older adult centers and other community-based organizations with physical locations to hold educational workshops, in-person and virtual clinics, and generate referrals.

The availability of service providers and other organizations with physical locations is critical to New York's veteran community because of the demographics of our veteran population. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics<sup>1</sup>, approximately 50% of New York State's veterans are over the age of 60. When you add in veterans who are aged 50 and over, we are looking at 2/3 of New York's veteran population. About 43% of our veterans served in either the Vietnam War, the Korean War, or in World War II. Just this past week on

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran\\_population.asp](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp)

March 29, 2023, we marked the 50th anniversary of when the last U.S. troops left Vietnam. Which means that the youngest Vietnam era veterans will turn 68 this year. These numbers are why the VOLS Veterans Initiative focuses our work on providing free legal services to New York City's older veterans.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a stark digital divide in our city. When the pandemic forced physical locations to close and providers moved services online, many of the most vulnerable New Yorkers were left behind because they lacked access to or did not have the comfort with the technology needed in order to access services. A key group that fell victim to the digital divide was older New Yorkers. Not only were many older New York veterans unable to access services during the height of the pandemic but they were also socially isolated.

According to the National Council on Aging<sup>2</sup>, COVID-19 driven social isolation may have increased the risk of depression, cognitive decline, and dementia. In addition, social isolation may also have an impact on physical health and the ability to conduct activities of daily living. All of these factors will impact an older veteran's ability to continue to live a healthy life in the community.

If we are concerned about the mental and physical health of our aging veteran population we need to ensure that they have access to services in physical locations where they can connect with other members of their community and to critical services.

For some veterans this means attending meals and other programming at their local New York City Department for the Aging funded older adult center. For others this means connecting with their fellow veterans at Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Halls. Some will go to the Vet Center in their borough or to other veteran services organizations with physical locations. Wherever our older veterans choose to connect with their community, it is important that New York City's older veteran population has a wide range of options that meet their needs and desires. We know the problems that social isolation can cause, and we should all be invested in ensuring that older veterans do not fall victim to those harms.

We would like to thank the City Council for holding this hearing and continuing to invest in services and programs that make New York City a place where veterans feel welcomed and at home. The many organizations and services that are supported by the Council's Veterans Initiative are critical to this shared goal.

Peter Kempner, Esq.  
Legal Director and Senior Law Project Director

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncoa.org/article/covid-driven-isolation-can-be-dangerous-for-older-adults>

**The Evergreens**  
**Veterans Training in Green Careers**  
**Proposal a/o February 2023**

The Evergreens Green Job Training for Veterans provides paid internship training and job placement in green careers with good benefits and long-term career prospects in both professional and blue-collar jobs depending upon a Veteran's preference and capabilities. Held on the restorative and beautiful 225-acre grounds of the historic Evergreens Cemetery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the program provides hands-on and classroom training and soft skills for transition to civilian employment. Graduates will secure job placement serving New York City's green workforce which has many jobs available. Upon completion, Veterans will be able to apply for work in fields to improve New York City by working in municipal jobs in parks, nonprofit organizations and private industry settings that require grounds, landscaping, and other green services. The Evergreens is grateful to serve Veterans and the City by providing job training in a green field where demand outstrips supply for city workers.

- A goal of the Landscape Restoration Program is to assist Veterans in acquiring the hard skills for long term green careers with job security and full benefits, and the soft skills to help them to meet challenges as they transition to civilian careers. Graduates will have landscape training, OSHA-30, and Site Safety Certification.
- Another goal of this program is to provide trained landscape professionals in New York City where demand for trained landscape employees outstrips supply. Careers in landscape restoration are green careers, a rapidly growing field offering employment at multiple levels -- from entry level to management level, from municipal employment to nonprofit and private employment – as well as entrepreneur opportunities.

This professional level training will consist of college level classroom courses as well as actual hands-on grounds work training taught by instructors from The Davey Institute, the research, education, and training arm of The Davey Tree Expert Company, the second largest national landscape company. Davey, registered with NYC DYCD, has been running landscape training programs for youth for years. Through college level classroom instruction and hands-on grounds work training, Veterans will learn the following landscape and safety training:

- Overall view of the landscape restoration profession
- Planting of perennials, tree, and shrubs
- Post-planting care and landscape bed maintenance
- String trimming, mowing, leaf & grass blowing
- Landscape bed maintenance
- Shrub and small tree pruning
- Team labor techniques  
and
- OSHA-30 Safety Certification
- Site Safety Certificate – required for employment on NYC construction sites

In addition, a Veterans employment agency recommended by NYC DVS, with wrap-around career support services, will provide civilian workforce development skills such as resume preparation, job interviews and placement, along with advice to help with issues such as transition management, skills assessments, and career goal setting as well as follow up tracking.

Graduates of this program will secure job placement serving New York City's green workforce. Veterans will help improve New York City by working in municipal jobs in parks, nonprofit organizations and private industry settings that require grounds, landscaping, and other green services.

Testimony of Dr. Cleopatra Brown

***Before the NYC COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS***

April 04,2023

Good afternoon,

I want to thank the NYC Council Committee on Veterans for the opportunity to share my testimony here today. My name is Dr. Cleopatra Brown. I am a property owner in Brownsville; I've served (6) years in the United States Navy from August 1982-May 1988 and (2) years in Reservist here in NYC. I am the Chairperson of the CB16 Veterans Affairs Committee, a member of the CB3 Veterans Committee, and an advocate for my community and the veteran population.

On behalf of the Community Board 3 and Community Board 16 Veterans' Affair Committee, we respectfully request that the NYC Department of Finance recognize and consider establishing a Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans under the NYS Real Property Tax Law 458-b. Currently, NYS, Hempstead, Rockland, Suffolk, and Nassau County, to name a few, have adopted legislation that established Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans.

According to the NYC Department of Finance, the only veterans who qualify for Real Property Tax Exemptions are those who served during the following conflicts: WWI, WWII, Korean, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Currently, Cold War Veterans are being **"denied"** and told that we do not qualify as veterans because the NYC Real Property Tax law does not recognize Cold War Veterans.

Cold War veterans are people, male and female, who served on active duty in the United Armed Forces from September 2, 1945, to December 26, 1991, and were discharged or released under honorable conditions.

Every veteran bravely answered the call to duty; we raised our hands and committed to serve and protect our country, and we accomplished that mission! As Cold War Veterans, we have earned the right to be recognized as a veteran, and we are respectfully requesting that NYC Department of Finance recognize us as well.

Community Board 3, Community Board 16, and the Brooklyn Borough Board have voted in favor and passed a Resolution to amend and expand NYC Department of Finance Real Property Tax to Cold War veterans.

On behalf of the Veterans Affairs Committee and the Cold War Veterans residing in New York City, we recommend the Advisory Committee amend the NYC Department of Finance Real Property Tax Exemption to include Cold War veterans.

I want to thank the NYC Council for their time, consideration, and the opportunity to express the concerns of my fellow veterans.

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/4/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: TANGA L. WILSON - THOMAS

Address: 1 CENTRE ST. SUITE 2208 NYC NY 10011

I represent: NYC DEPT OF VETERANS SERVICES

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: Kim Moore

Address: Amsterdam Ave NYC NY 10033

I represent: Yeshiva University

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4-4-23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LEN WILLIAMS

Address: 39 STREET

I represent: VIETNAM VETERANS CHAPTER #32

Address: 61-57 MASPETH AVE 11378

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms



THE COUNCIL  
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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/4/23

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Name: DEAN L. ROSE

Address: 138 E 12th St New York NY

I represent: Greenwich Village

Address: Greenwich

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 04/04/2023

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Name: Ryan Graham

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: District 1, Dept. of NY

Address: Albany

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/4/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Peter Kempner

Address: Dan Hill Rd. Brooklyn NY 11218

I represent: Volunteers of Legal Service

Address: 40 Worth Street, NY NY 1003

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: James Herdon

Address: 1 Centre Street, Suite 2208, NYC

I represent: NYC Dept. of Veterans' Services

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: JASON LOUGHRAN

Address: 1 CENTRE ST, NYC, NY

I represent: DVS

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Ellen Grady

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: DVS

Address: 1 CENTRE ST, Suite 2208, NYC, NY

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