

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Start: 1:02 p.m.

Recess: 3:40 p.m.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM, CITY HALL

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola

Ari Kagan

Sandy Nurse

Vickie Paladino

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

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Helen Thurston
Evergreen Cemetery Preservation Foundation

Raymond Ramos
Commander
Queensboro Hill, VFW Post 3427

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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon and welcome to
3 the Committee on Veterans. At this time we ask that
4 you please place phones on vibrate or silent mode.
5 Thank you for your cooperation chair ready to begin.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sergeant. Good
7 afternoon. Welcome to today's Veterans' Committee
8 oversight hearing on the state of Veterans of Foreign
9 Wars, American Legion Posts, and other veteran
10 service organizations with physical locations. I am
11 Councilmember Robert Holden, chair of the New York
12 City Council's Committee on Veterans.

13 VFW and American Legion Post provide crucial
14 advocacy and support services for veterans. Since
15 its inception, VFW has been instrumental in
16 establishing the US Department of Veterans Affairs,
17 the VA, the development of a national cemetery
18 system, the passing of-- of the post 911 GI Bill,
19 improving VA medical care for female veterans, and
20 advocating for providing compensation for veterans
21 exposed to Agent Orange or diagnosed with Gulf War
22 Syndrome.

23 American Legion posts provide mentorships and
24 assist veterans with accessing education, health
25

care, stable housing, meaningful careers, and they build strong social networks as we know.

Local halls operated by VFW and American Legion posts serve as a safe, critical community space for veterans coping with post traumatic stress disorder and issues attendant to the transition of military to civilian life, as well as provide a place to commiserate and support each other. And those are-- that's the critical part of the these Legion halls and American Legion halls and VFW is. They provide a critical resource for the community providing a space for community members to celebrate a number of things like weddings and birthdays, and so forth, and other milestones. These are invaluable locations.

During the pandemic, many posts nationwide provided crucial resources to their communities, exemplified by American Legion Post 483 in Queens, which operated a food pantry feeding 1000s of families.

Over the years many of us have visited a VFW or American Legion Hall for, like I mentioned before, parties, community fundraisers, and local events. So it's a community center also, not just a meeting place for veterans. They were and are the

cornerstone of many communities. These locations were especially important to Vietnam vets, who did not get a warm welcome returning from that war. And that's why we owe it to them. We owe it certainly to the Vietnam vets who, again, didn't receive-- and I live through that period obviously went through it, and they didn't get a warm welcome.

So these veterans found a place to make friends, discuss their time and service, and ultimately found a place of belonging.

However, VFWs and American Legion Post struggle to remain open as they struggle to attract and retain the membership of younger post 911 veterans and deal with the economic pressures imposed by the pandemic. Over 12,000 American Legion halls closed for at least part of the pandemic. The average age of a VW member is 67 with 400,000 members over 80. The halls that have managed to stay open continue to provide vital social services to our nation's veterans and serve the community in which they are located.

Today we will look forward to hearing how the Administration currently supports veterans service organizations and to identify ways the city can better support our American Legion and VFW halls and

posts. We also look forward to hearing from veterans themselves on the importance of these organizations.

So I want to thank the Administration, the advocates, and the veterans who have joined us today.

At this time, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues who are here, Councilmember Kagan and Councilmember Paladino. And finally, I would like to thank committee staff who work to prepare for this hearing, Committee Counsel David Romero, and Legislative Policy Analyst Anastasia Zimina, as well as my Chief of Staff Daniel Kurzyna, and Legislative Director Craig Caruana.

I will now turn it over to the Committee Counsel to swear in the members of the Administration. Do you want to...?

COUNSEL: We will now call on the following members of the administration to testify.

James Hendon, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans Services, Paul Vallone, Deputy Commissioner of External Affairs, Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner for Policy and Strategic Partnerships, Tanya Thomas, Veterans Care Coordinator. I will deliver the oath to you and

after reading the oath, I will call upon you to respond to it.

Please raise your right hand. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth before this committee and to respond honestly to Councilmember questions.

Commissioner James Hendon?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

COUNSEL: Deputy Commissioner Paul Vallone?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER VALLONE: I do.

COUNSEL: Assistant Commissioner Ellen Greeley?

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: I do.

COUNSEL: Tanya Thomas?

MS. THOMAS: I do.

COUNSEL: Thank you. Commissioner Hendon, you may begin your testimony.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Before-- We've been joined by Councilmember Nurse who's a member of the committee. Go ahead, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good afternoon Chair Holden, members of the committee advocates and New York City veterans. My name is James Hendon and I'm honored to serve as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans Services, or DVS.

I'm joined by my colleagues Paul Vallone, Deputy Commissioner of External Affairs virtually, Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner for Policy and Strategic Partnerships, and Tanya Thomas, our Veterans Care Coordinator and American Legion Post 483 Rosedale Laurelton Auxiliary President.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to discuss the very important topic regarding this city's veteran service organizations, or VSOs, which provide our community's veterans with essential services such as VA benefits advisors, scholarship services, student fellowships, military assistance programs, 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's outreach, we've 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. It is important to keep in mind throughout this hearing that while these organizations are run independently from DVS, part of our mission and 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 that do not have paid staff, and therefore do not have the 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 veteran service organizations in the nation. Initially established decades ago, these organizations were instrumental and advocating for the creation of the Veterans Administration, creating GI Bill benefits for returning World War Two veterans, and establishing the National Cemetery Administration.

Today, these efforts continue and these organizations along with various other veterans 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 to does a 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 were present today, perhaps for the first time I

would like to give you a summary of these initiatives.

The NYC Department of Veterans Services has several initiatives to support the city's VSOs including but not limited to our Final Honors Program. The Final Honors Program ensures that every eligible unclaimed and indigent veteran decedent is given a dignified burial with military honors at a national cemetery. We're in partnership with the Chief Medical Examiner's Office, the New York State American Legion, and several the local funeral homes. DVS facilitated more than 200 burials during fiscal year 2022. More information on that is at nyc.gov/vetburials.

Next one is Mission Vet Check. Mission Vet Check is 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 a central public services, COVID-19 resources, and testing locations and online mental health support. Mission Vet Check has been executed through various partnerships with various veteran service organizations like the United War Veterans Council, New York Hope for the Warriors, Veterans of

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Foreign Wars Post 528, American Legion Post 422, American Legion Post 398, The Catholic War Veterans, the 715 Veterans Association Inc, Vietnam Veterans of America Post 126, and the National Association of Black Military Women, Brooklyn Chapter. More details are available at nyc.gov/vetcheck.

For veteran benefits services, starting in 2022 accredited DVS staff members began helping NYC veterans and their families process Veterans Affairs claims 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. More can be found there at nyc.gov/vetclaims.

For Vet Connect Pro: In 2021 DVS launched Vet Connect Pro, 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 five boroughs with approximately 700 veterans using the system. More can be found at nyc.gov/VetConnectPro.

Veteran Voices Project, or VVP is DVS's 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, and more can be found at nyc.gov/vetvoices.

And when it comes to food insecurity for the DVS food insecurity initiative through a partnership with HelloFresh and the New York State Division of Veterans Services, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1548 Springfield Gardens and the American Legion Post 483 Laurelton, DVS has distributed more than 28,000 meal kits to veterans in South East Queens. And separate from that more than 1 million food kits have been distributed throughout the city, details available at nyc.gov/vetfood. And then when it comes to ending chronic veteran homelessness, our housing and support services team has housed over 1000 homeless veterans and stood up an aftercare unit to help ensure that veterans whom DVS houses remain housed, avoiding a return to housing insecurity. Details at nyc.gov/vethousing.

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Lastly, DVS has provided \$25,000 in financial assistance available 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, Stephen Siller Tunnel To Towers Foundation, and Richmond County savings foundation. Whereas a total of 22 veteran service organizations were awarded \$1,136 apiece to help offset economic hardships, organizations who received the grant are as follows: American Legion Sam Young Post 620, William Irving Post 774, Memorial Post 1833, George P. Davis Post 116, McFadden Brothers Post 1380, Little Neck Douglaston Post 103, Broad Channel Post 1404, John F Prince Post 6478, Continental Post 1424, Corporal John Russet Post 1632, Rosedale Post 483, and Benjamin Moore Post 1946, Goldstar Post 1365, Suspino Russo Post 1544, Henry and Stanley Chicon Post 1578. That was American Legion.

From the VFW, Edward F. Lacosky Post 7096, Prince Winn Post 260, Edward O. Gordon Post 5298, Queensboro Hill Post 3427. Also the Michael Allis Post 9587.

From the Catholic War Veterans, St. Sebastian's Post 870.

In conclusion, I'd like to take this opportunity to share a 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 we'll do our utmost to make certain that you receive any support needed to maintain and expand the footprint each of you have built in every neighborhood and borough in 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 us to testify before you today. We are pleased to address any questions you may have.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Commissioner. And aside from those grants-- so essentially \$1,100 was given to these-- these posts that you mentioned, 22. How many posts do we have in New York City? Does anybody have a number? Do you have that? Get closer to the mic.

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2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: During COVID, I
3 was able to put together-- compile a list and came up
4 with about 170 different organizations.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How many again?

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: 170 veterans--

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: One Seven Oh.

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yep. But not
9 all of them have real estate.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And I want to clarify, we
12 define a VSO as if a group of veterans are gathering,
13 that to us is a VSO. And so you've got, you know,
14 our legacy VSOs, the American Legions, Veterans of
15 Foreign Wars, things along those lines, of which we'd
16 estimate somewhere between 55 and 60 physically have
17 property. But then you have other entities that we
18 look at as VSOs. So if it's an employee resource
19 group, if it's a student veterans group, if it's
20 matched, we-- everyone is equal in our eyes, as far
21 as a group of veterans is a VSO.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But-- But you understand in
23 in your testimony-- you understand how important
24 these-- these are. And in my in my opening
25 statement, they're really kind of like a community

center. But they also act as-- really, they support our veterans in so many ways, including mental health. Because what better way that do you have if you came back from-- and again, many-- when I speak to many of the veterans from the Vietnam War and before, they still have those scars, they still have definite issues that they're dealing with. And they tell me that the best way they-- they get relief is by going to these posts.

So that's why it's incumbent upon us to really keep them open and support them. And other than what you mentioned those grants from-- how much is in that 20-- it was \$25,000, right?

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yeah. We raised \$25,000-- We raised \$25,000, from the various foundations. But in addition, for those that didn't have real estate, we also distributed Home Depot cards, gift cards of \$100 to various Home Depot organizations.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. But, you know, in looking at-- in visiting my posts in my district, we-- and I guess the Councilmembers here can talk about their districts, what-- what they're facing, every time a storm comes, they get impacted, it seems.

Then then we find out that their insurance didn't cover it. And, I mean, even getting one of the-- my Carl Linsky Post in my district had five feet of water in the basement. And I tried to get the fire department in there to pump it out, the last hurricane that we got hit with. And it's just, you know, if their insurance doesn't cover it, they have a tough time recovering.

So what else do you see the role of DVS to try to help them maneuver around-- Are there federal grants, like you mentioned, you know, that they would they could tap into for capital? Because many of these-- these posts that we see are in need of it. They're-- especially capital, and that's what I'm trying to try to maneuver.

But where do you see what do you see the role of DVS if in a perfect world, if you had the funding, if we had access to all the grants? And by the way, the many of the veterans-- I mean, I had trouble maneuvering when I was when I was trying to do a not-for-profit, trying to maneuver the city's funding process. And I had to get help from-- and obviously the veterans, many of them, if not most of them have

problems with trying to get through the paperwork.
Even the best of not-for-profits have trouble.

So I know your office helps a bit with that. But
in a perfect world, with proper funding, where do you
see DVS going or trying to keep these halls open?

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yeah, so I would
I would say that we do try to direct them to funding
sources, in certain cases, particularly with the
economic disaster loan program that the feds were
offering during COVID, we offered-- we created a
relationship with the PenFed Foundation, and they
were on hand to help facilitate the loan application
itself. In all honesty, not too many took advantage
of it because by the time we got our message out, the
money was gone. So I mean, there's some realities to
it. In the case of New York State, you know, they
have their capital funding program. We alerted again
the VSOs to that opportunity.

A lot of this, in all honesty has to do with
capacity building for the organizations. And I think
collectively, the City Council, our agency, as well
as a number of not-for-profit organizations are in
the building to strengthen and-- and increase the
survivability of these particular organizations. But

there's also another piece of it. And that's the willingness for some of these organizations to be willing to make changes to them also. And I think that that's each-- each of these organizations have a certain culture to it. You have to be respectful of what that culture might be. And also recognize that again, you know, you're talking about an all-volunteer organization there.

They're a peculiar kind of classification. They're really mostly 501C-19s, which means that they're not really a small business. And they're, in some cases don't qualify as a real not-for-profit too.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And you know, it's another thing that we're hearing. They're-- they're not a business, but yet they get charged-- many of them are getting charged business rates for utilities. Do you have any information on that? Because that's-- that's some of the. Like, for instance, we got a complaint from a hall-- a VFW hall that wasn't in my district, but they said, why are they getting-- why do they have to pay business rates. If anybody knows you've ever tried to, you know, operate out of a business location, everything is much higher,

utilities, you know, the gas, everything. And it's really a crime that these-- these halls are paying for commercial rates. Is there any anything that we can do with-- with that area?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER VALLONE: Mr. Chair, I'll jump in, and Commissioner.

First of all, always good to see Councilmember Holden, and Chair, and my fellow Councilmembers, and to the new council members who have joined this prestigious Committee, welcome.

We are always eager to see the Councilmembers at the hearings and bring back the testimony and stories from your districts.

You know, DDS really isn't the regulatory body for-- for these organizations. But what we do is try to assist. So if you see any of these fines or regulations that come up, what we try to do, and what Ellen and the team does is kind of navigate between the building department and any other agency that might step in to do that.

I saw the bill that you put in, and I think that's a great idea to extend the time. Those are the steps that these organizations need-- need more time. And it really is a shame when they're not

given the proper notice to step up and make the changes that might be necessary. Because most of that wasn't done intentionally, it was just done on an emergency basis.

To the prior question you brought up. You know, it's interesting, you know, Bob and I, we worked together to kind of bring the Council to the table to that also. So now that sitting on-- with two hats, on the Administration side and the Council side, what we tried to do this year, and I thank Chair Holden and his team for joining in, as well as Councilmember Palladino and some of the other Councilmembers to make the Councilmembers offices resource centers, and also put on our website and your website how the VSOs can apply for these critical grants. And most of them are on the Councilmembers' own district and funding ability. So those \$5,000 or \$10,000 grants are tremendous. The problem that we ran into was awareness of the program and how to apply.

So this year DVS really made a concerted effort to put that process, put that link available, and work with the councilmembers. We even had Borough President Donovan Richards agree to match with the

councilmembers of the Queen's delegation, any capital grants that could be offered to the VSOs.

That's something we want to continue in future years and something we want to grow upon. Because if we can really start to tackle the foundational issues that these organizations-- which sometimes it's the bankruptcy problem (can't fix the roof, can't do the heating, can't do the floors, can't make accessibility ramps) it gets overwhelming. And we share in that overwhelmingness. And it's very difficult for the smallest agency in the city to try to navigate through that. But-- but making the organizations aware of those funds has been a proud step in the right direction this year. And we want to grow on that.

Thank you, Paul Vallone. And again, we work together when you were in the Council. And some of the ideas, again, that we-- we said is the utilities or even the building department like you had mentioned should not give them a fine automatically these halls, they should warn them. They should tell them, look this is a serious issue. We'll give you some time. Rather than just fine them, warn them. And so we have to get the City to work together with

these holes. But also we need the utilities, like-- like I mentioned before, that we need to bring them into-- into line and get everybody on the same team. So let's-- let's work together. And I'll certainly work with your office Commissioner to try to talk to the utilities, try to-- try to straighten out each post. There's 170 like you mentioned. It's-- That's not, you know, a difficult task. Yes, it is maybe contacting, and trying to iron out these things, but I think in one fell swoop, if we work together, we can fix some of the problems that are facing these halls.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: May I add that we're on the precipice--

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Pulling the mic closer, because I have difficulty hearing. Yeah.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: So we're on the precipice of something really exciting and novel with Dwyer funding. We issued a request for a vote of interest. We've gotten back about 21 different proposals, two from which-- from the VSOs themselves. But what we're really looking to do is for our local socialization providers, and that means arts and cultural organizations, dance studios, yoga therapy,

1 message therapy, organizations to go ahead and to
2 really collaborate with the local VSOs. And we are
3 going to try to, you know, what I call help with the
4 sausage-making, in order to get the organizations to
5 chat with each other, and embrace each other, so that
6 we can really create thriving VSOs in our community.
7 It's an experiment. We'll see whether the doors
8 open. But certainly we're really excited about
9 getting the money out the door and getting our VSOs
10 engaged in the community.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that leads me to the
13 next group of questions: Like, how do we get the
14 younger veterans involved? Because as I know-- I
15 know were going to say something, Commissioner. But
16 alright, but-- but, you know, as we saw from history,
17 I remember when my dad was a part of a-- when he came
18 back from World War Two, and there were no-- even in
19 the 70s and 80s, there were no or very few Vietnam
20 vets. And many-- many times there was like, some of
21 the members kind of like, shunned even-- even the
22 Vietnam vets that because they're-- they're much
23 older, the World War Two vets. So they didn't accept
24 them, or the Korean war vets. So there's that--
25 there's that recruitment that we have to do to try to

get the veterans in. And I think some of the veterans will probably say this, but we need-- To keep these-- these halls open, we need recruiting some of the recent veterans. And do you have-- has there been any outreach-- any outreach on that? And then I'll turn it over to my colleagues to ask questions. And I'll wait for my second group of questions.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much about that, Mr. Chair. You know, when I think about this topic. To me, you know, you mentioned in your remarks that its-- the average age of a VFW member 67. And we just said last week, the average age-- the median age of a Vietnam veteran is 76. And so the age hasn't been going down. In other words, it implies you don't have a lot of young people coming into the mix. I feel as though-- We do many things at DVS. One of the top things is try to bring more young blood into these systems.

And to that point, for the better part of more than two years, we went back and forth with the Defense Department to obtain information about the veterans who are coming home. 200,000 people leave the military each year, as far as leaving active

service 100,000 of them settle down in the places they are not from, and so we got a highly mobile population. About 3,000 to 5,000 come to New York City. So out of all 200,000 to get out, roughly 3,000 to 5,000 come to New York City. We know because as of last fall, the DOD started to send us the electronic separation information for all vets. This is better information the VA, because it's coming straight from the source.

And so for us, it's what can we do to message to these young servicemembers, people who've just left the service to tie them in with the older, you know, service members as can be found in these Veterans Service Organizations. And so whenever we talk about all these problems, I think to myself, it's about the body's. It's about having that young blood within that post, so we can be able to see this baton handover in the right way.

We are working avidly with outreach too, the transitioning service members. What's tricky here and Ellen intimated-- she suggested it. It's-- You've got cultural differences here. You've got different ways people operate also. You've got different modalities. So you may have someone for

whom, you know, all the connection I need is through this. I don't necessarily feel like I need to go to the post. How do we tie that person in with that American Legion, with that VFW. You know, so I've got these different factors here where I think that critical to us saving our legacy VSOs, especially the post is getting that young blood in. And we've been doing we can on the outreach front. You know, I can leave it to Ellen to speak more about our mentorship activities there, but to me, the center of gravity--

You know, one piece of this is information, the issue you brought up about the utilities and the wrong rates being charged our veteran organizations, it's making sure they have information. Last hearing, I was quick to point out that the Council funding deadline had not expired yet. We had a website for it: nyc.gov/VetCouncilFunding. I love them sites, you know, and we want to make sure folks know about that, they know about the state's capital grants program. We're working to distribute the state Dwyer funding in a certain way. When the VA put out a grant for the Parker Gordon Fox Grant to end veteran suicide, to help end it, we got the word out to our service organizations about that. So we

let them know, city, state, federal opportunities.

And if there are philanthropic foundation opportunities, to let folks know.

Just as an example, we mentioned, you know, we raised about \$25,000. We split the check amongst all who applied. And that's how you got the \$1,136 that went to those VSOs during COVID. It was a two page application. We only got 22 respondents after roughly 50 whom we'd reached out to. And so it speaks to-- We need to make sure that we've got enough folks there to be able to do that type of work. And if that's the lift with the two page application, where I was there watching Ellen and her team, tell folks, "Look, please fill this out. We got you. Just fill it out." If that's what we're dealing with that, what are we looking at on the Council discretionary funding side? What are we looking at on the federal side, among other things. And so we feel like getting that that fountain of youth within the organizations can be-- that's attacking the deeper issue here, in my opinion, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it sounds like the Council offices could help out too. Because we could

then, if they're not responding to you, then we could, you know, you can go to us and say, "Look, this is what we have to do," or this-- "We haven't gotten an answer from this local post. Can you reach out?"

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER VALLONE: Exactly. That's-- that would be tremendous help to that partnership. And I think we've seen that together in the offices we're working in, what a difference it's made to the VSOs in the councilmembers' districts, now using DVS with the councilmember together at your office is such a relief not having to come downtown or to the borough hall. Anytime we can bring services and staff-- and you'll hear Tanya in a little bit sort of speak to that. It's a tremendous relief and it gets the whole process moving a lot quicker.

Okay, I'm going to turn it over to my colleagues. Councilmember Paladino had some questions.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Good afternoon, and thank you. I want to say to the Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner, and to Tanya: I can't thank you enough. As being a Veterans Resource Center, the second Wednesday-- two Wednesdays a month. We just finished last Wednesday. Tanya will be back again

next Wednesday. My office has become a turnstile. It hasn't-- it doesn't stop. She's busy from the minute she gets there. And she stays so often much later than she needs to be. People come from Staten Island. They come from Westchester. They come from all over the five boroughs.

So this resource center that we set up in our Council offices, mine has been going since December. It has been a tremendous asset to know that these vets know that all they have to do is take a ride they start to book appointments with my office or they just come knowing already the dates are set. They know every Wednesday that Tonya is going to be there.

We have a in District 19, I understand, one of the largest concentrated war veterans than anyplace else in the city. With that being said, we have seen our VFWs close. One, Paul, that interests me, and you know which one it is, is the Catholic War Veterans off of 160th Street, on 160th Street off of Northern Boulevard. It's-- it's in bad, bad shape. And that's needed. These guys are practically bankrupt. They need a new roof very badly. I wanted to fund the roof. I wanted to talk more to Donovan

Richards about that. Because I-- they-- these guys, I'm telling you, they need-- that building needs help terribly. And they don't want to dissolve it even though they've shrunk in number.

We have another VFW that was located on 149th Street and 19th Avenue. And that was very sad to see that. It's an old Victorian house. It's been a VFW since the 60s, and that closed. It has now been torn down and a house is being built. They were then-- Those vets was sent to the American Legion Hall Post 131, which is on Clintonville Street, which you've also visited.

And what we're doing is we're-- because the population isn't there, you know, to fill a building, or to keep a building up, whether they have parties or fundraisers.

So my question is, I guess to you guys: Am I going about this the right way to get my funding to help the Catholic war veterans in particular, this one building? And what more can we do to make sure you get funding?

One second, I just want-- another thing: Did we yet as a City Council do a budget for the veterans? We're working on it. So we haven't yet have had a

budget hearing when it comes to the Veterans Administration. And you all know how I feel about that. So I'm going to leave it there. Because I think it's sad that it hasn't happened for you guys yet. So take it away, guys. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'll start. Thank you so much to, you know, Councilwoman, and we're so happy to have Tanya, you know, at the 19th District Office. You know, we appreciate that. The same thing to Chair Holden, as far as just having representation at DVS with the pop up veteran resource centers that are to come.

When it comes to-- You know, when I listen to situation you mentioned with the Catholic War Veterans on 168th and Northern Boulevard, it's-- You know, this goes back to that State nonprofit capital grants program that was established. It was a pool of-- its \$5 million set aside for VSOs to apply for money to go towards capital improvements. They've placed a bandwidth of \$25,000 to \$75,000, as far as what's permitted, but it's something as far as a start point for it. And we-- The program-- The last day to apply was last week, was March 31st though. And so we're asking that that be extended, so we can

be able to do what we can to be right by folks who have these capital needs.

Something I'd be remiss if I didn't say too:

Last December, we shared a list of all Veterans Service Organizations with the Speaker's office, so that it would ideally distribute from the Speaker to all members so that all councilmembers would know who are my VSOs and my council district and who's-- with contact information.

We're close to executing an agreement with the Council where, as was mentioned, we've identified more than 100,000 of the roughly 200,000 veterans in the city. As far as having contact information, reaching these folks. We are close to finishing execution of an agreement with the account with the Speaker where she will then distribute-- her office will be able to distribute to all members so you know what we know, as far as here are all the veterans that we're aware of within your district as provided by DVS.

And we're looking to provide that information drop at least once a year, at least, where when we get updated info, we will pass it to the Speaker's office, so they get it to you.

It's the one-plus-one-equals-three dynamic: We can only do so much. But together, we can do so much more. And so the touches from us reaching out and you reaching out. It can help to feed that young blood into these organizations just for folks to-- just to level, I said-- I always say at the hearings: We've got 24.6% of the veterans in this city self identify, based on VA data. So 24.6% of all self-identify in New York City. It's 29.7% in New York State, it's 33.1% in America.

And so you see me, there are three other people you don't see. And so for us, it's about the deeper issue too when we talk about getting the young blood into these VSOs, to get you to step out of the shadows and be a part of this. And so we're hoping that can help with some of the things that you brought up, Madam Councilwoman.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER VALLONE: And Commissioner, if I may, since I know District 19 quite well, so Councilmember Paladino, thank you for really taking the effort with Councilmember Holden to allowing DVS to serve the veterans there. There are so many in northeast queens and in Queens County. It's the

largest amount-- demographic of veterans in the city, if not the country.

So every additional service -- and Tanya, if you could, when I'm done just talk about some of the services there that you're working on. It'd be tremendous to hear those stories.

When you ask if you're taking the right approach, you are. And we're so excited when additional councilmembers come to the hearings, because then they can hear from your efforts and our efforts, how they can turn their councilmember offices into those assisting locations, because really applying for that grant process is a very short four-to-five-six-week window from January to February, and then applying for it to the Councilmember, and to the Borough President, and to the delegation, and to the Speaker allows four different avenues for the VSOs to look for capital money. And then yes, you can step in, and apply for the grant, and work with the Borough President, if like in Queens, they're willing to do so to double that money. That's really the step, and until the applicant, in this case the VSO, makes the step to apply, we can't do anything. We can just kind of guide them. So you see it on the website.

You see it now in your offices. That for hopefully by next year, 12 more months of this approach, I believe then you're going to have these over 170 organizations saying hey, there's money there. The commission is talking about state money, and no one is talking about grants. Tanya's talking about the actual physical services being provided by staff. That's how we'll be able to tackle this going forward.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, thank you.

Councilmember Nurse?

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Thank you, Chair. I want to just thank you so much. My-- My father was a 20-year veteran. My mother also is a veteran. I grew up on military bases all over the world. So I'm happy to be on this committee.

One of the things you're talking about is infrastructure and capital, and so much resource needed to get these places repaired. And I'm curious if you've explored tracks for relocation, as some of these bigger buildings are coming online that are already subsidized by city dollars, or are already subsidized by public dollars, putting them on those floors, on the ground floors, where there's community

land use, already lower-- lower rent, which might bring some of these posts into maybe more active commercial corridors, or just more busier areas that might help bridge that gap. So that's one question.

And then the second question I had is in terms of bringing in younger vets who are coming in, I heard a little bit about some-- like some themes around programs. But I'm curious, like, what are the resources being committed to capacity development for a much older population, being-- having the capacity and skill sets to bridge some of the cultural divides? And obviously, the, you know, the wars of today are very different from the words of past. You know, how are you building that capacity for them to be able to organize and do outward-facing events, given that there's already the resource drain of just keeping the lights on and keeping the buildings up and running?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much, Councilmember Nurse. I'll start now, and I'll pass it to, you know, Tanya and Ellen to add to this. On the issue of redevelopment, the center of gravity of it is that leadership for that Veteran Service Organization. So before COVID, we had something

called the VSO legacy project, where we were talking with our various posts about things they could do to optimize their land. Something that we've seen many houses of worship do lately, really starting out in Brooklyn and-- and other neighborhoods where the-- that faith center would say, "Look, let's break this down. Let's build something new. We'll have housing on top. We'll have a newer center on the bottom." And so that's something where we began those conversations. That's why we know it was approximately 57 VSOs that had their own land. That was from back then, pre-COVID, as far as we knew about.

It was-- It got stunted because of COVID, but there was also a lot of reluctance to change, because that's a decision that has to be made by each individual post.

And so that is something where we are looking to begin those conversations, again with our VSOs, so they can see what the pathway looks like, if they were to do this, or look at a way to optimize the resources they have.

When it comes to capacity development and bridging the gap, I'll say a little bit, and I'll

defer to my colleagues here. A lot of it is, to me, us amplifying the message of our VSOs. So if a an American Legion Post, or Veterans of Foreign Wars Lodge, if they're doing certain activities to make sure, you know, you may not have that in-house avenue to get it out on social media in front of those younger eyeballs, but we do and so how can we amplify you with what we're doing in social media ourselves, what we're doing in our newsletter, with what's being done, you know, in other platforms, including, as an example, you know, OurVeterans.NYC is a calendar, where veterans look at different opportunities available in the community. Is this, you know, event being held by this Legion Post or by this VFW Lodge? Is it there?

And so that's one way we try to assist to try to help bring in this connection. And one other thing, and then I'll pass to colleagues is: We are having, it's called the Transition Assistance Program is it's something you have to go through when you're leaving the military. So if I'm active duty, I'm getting ready to leave, I have to spend at least two days going through a workshop where people are preparing me for what lies ahead.

Now that we know who these veterans are, who are coming to New York City, we say 3,000 to 5,000, because this is based on the actual numbers we've gotten. We started-- Our first drop arrived in September. And so once we get to it annually, I'll be able to say with certainty, this is the count. The run rate is taking us to somewhere between three to five, it's based on the weekly information we're getting. We want to also have a resource fair for those transitioning service members where not only are employers present, but also you would have the different, you know, VSOs there as well as a way to foster better connection and see if we can get those touches. And so I'll defer to my colleagues for more on this.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: I would say that there are definitely many American Legions and VFWs that are thriving, and they're thriving because their sons or their daughters have become active in the local post. And they do offer a lot of social, sociological activities. They have bingo parties. In fact, I know there's one coming up at the American Legion in Forest Hills, for instance. They offer, you know, definitely events that are-- that surround

2 Memorial Day as well as Veterans Day. And I'm sure
3 that almost each month, there's something on the
4 books for the members themselves to socialize.

5 So I-- There is a strong community, and what we
6 often find is that the members may not live locally,
7 but they do travel back to the old neighborhood. You
8 know, it's an opportunity for them to maybe have a
9 drink in the, you know, bar that they used to
10 frequent when they were younger people, there's a
11 sense of community, I've seen that. I mean, there's--
12 - there are jazz programs in Harlem. They happen to
13 have, you know, Bingo Night, if they're organizing a
14 parade in Forest Hills. So there is real life to a
15 lot of these, and they may not necessarily want to
16 move out of their particular communities, even though
17 they're building could use desperate, you know,
18 rehabilitation in many cases. But your idea is an
19 interesting one in many ways, you know, and that gets
20 to the point of, can we, you know, again, turn some
21 of these locations into veteran housing,
22 theoretically? And use it for--

23 COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: I guess I was curious--

24 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: -- and create
25 community space within those developments.

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Yeah.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: I mean, there's a lot of creativity, that I think all of us working together collectively, could come up with some pretty interesting ideas.

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Do you know how many of those that are considering redevelopment of their land that they own--

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: No. I mean--

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: -- have moved forward?

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: We-- we began the conversation before COVID. We-- we contacted an organization, the LISC Organization. They had something called NYLOP, which is an acronym for something [NB: New York Land Opportunity Program]. Nevertheless, and we did identify some perspective locations. But again, I-- part of it is really it gets back down to the willingness of a lot of these posts and chapters to want to, you know, change it up.

And just for a couple of examples, like, you know, in terms of reinvigorating these posts, you know, we talked a little bit about holding holistic wellness-- wellness programs there, creative arts

programs, employment preparedness, hosting workshops for survivors and caregivers, sponsoring informational forums at these facilities, you know, highlighting government not-for-profit and business services, and amplifying our message about what we do in our in our own agency. So these are all things that we would really love to import into-- into these facilities in many cases.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I just want to add to that. There were-- Of those locations that we-- there were four that were as of right-- of the locations, they could have done something turnkey. And when it comes to interest, we have to go back to square one on what was going on, because we were in these discussions.

I came into this job just before COVID. And this was an ongoing discussion where we were-- some of the back and forth, where it was fact-finding, for those that did express some interest. It was a very, very small number as far as that were. And not-- it was wasn't a "no." It was just, "we want to learn more."

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Right.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And so that's where we are on this. This is something we're looking to pick up right now--

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: And you said there's an organization that's willing-- Sorry, I'll be done. I don't want to take up too much space. So when that happens, when they say, "Yes, we're interested," are you having an outside consulting group come in and talk technicality with them or--

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: It's very premature at this point in time, and the organization that initially started the conversation, we were collaborating with-- Oh, sorry. Because the organization didn't had some funding from Chase, but I don't know if that funding is still there anymore. I think that they shut it down during COVID.

So part of it is, you know, gets back to, you know, trying to make this a priority. And I think collectively, we can all come up with some pretty amazing creative solutions. As a public-private partnership.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER VALLONE: I'll just jump in real quick there. Councilmember Nurse, you're right on that. These are the unexplored opportunities, right?, and the power of your council district that you can jump in on, because whether it's through EDC, through planning, through looking at it, once you

have those VSOs that are identified, are ownerships of that property, then you look at the zoning and constraints and the possibilities are there. I think the future here are these tremendous tabs of the amount of money that's needed to fix the capital projects gets so astronomical, that the only way to save some of them may be to redevelop that property as a brand new VSO on the first floor with affordable housing above it, or some community programming, and centers that can be included and create this tremendous-- Like Councilmember Holden said, it really is a community center, not just for the veterans, but for the families and the communities to celebrate all year round.

Could you imagine if we were to identify those and start to work with? So now you're getting into a situation where it may not be a grant, but it may be a developer, that's going to agree to redo the VSO on the first floor and put in your vision of affordable housing for your district on top of it, along with the community center. That's the type of bold steps I think that that we can all take.

MS. THOMAS: I just would like to add something here. Thank you for having me, first of all. Glad

to be here. I come to you, and I'm honored to be here to just add to the-- the whole situation that when we partner with organizations like yours, with City Council and have veteran assistance at the offices, it brings in the older generation that we speak about. And you know, I don't want to say older generation, but the elderly generation of veterans who have served, who have fought for our country. But many are, as we mentioned earlier, generational. Many families have served from generation to generation.

So when we bring in the-- the elder generation who already served when we connect them to services, whatever they may be, it does set the groundwork for the generational understanding that we're here for all generations. And this is seed planting. This is the basis of relationship building. And I really want to add that this happens in time. This is an issue in terms of recruitment for VSOs. This is an issue across the country. So it's not just us.

But we are honored to stand shoulder to shoulder to-- with your office, and with the VSOs to bring services to the community in a very real way.

Just before I came here, I had the honor to assist a veteran who was-- actually he let us know that he was 100% service connected. So he's already getting his military benefits. But because he has so many financial responsibilities, he is looking for food support, food supplement support. And we were very easily able to connect him to access the New York City Food Supplement Program, SNAP. And not just that, but direct him to food pantries, veteran-run food pantries in his own borough, which he was elated. His voice lit up over the phone. And he was so-- he was so grateful for the intimate and personal information, where he can get in his car and drive over to a veteran-run food pantry, where he's going to be able to meet his needs.

So when veterans contact us, I think that its relationship. It's relationship building. And people remember who helped them in a very real way.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And the population that deserves it most are the veterans. We all know that. They served our country. It's up to us to bring them services that they need to flourish in this-- in this society. And again, many of them come back. Just if you look at the veterans who have issues, and it's

mostly military-related, if you talk to them for any length of time, and I've spoken to a number of them. And they-- Especially if they were in combat, and this is what we-- You know, it happened to my dad, it happened to many family members who fought in World War Two, but certainly Vietnam was my generation. They didn't receive the proper services. They never did. And even now, they-- We owe it to them even into the point of education.

But-- But I like I like your idea, Councilmember Nurse, about new development. We should look at you know, if there if there's a ULURP in our district, take advantage of that. At a ULURP, I put in a school where, you know, that wasn't considered. But we could start to do that, and consider how about a you know, an American Legion, a VFW, or at least a community center that can be shared, which is I think, a great idea.

I just want to talk about collecting data and how we can help as a council office on-- we talked about a little bit about the Post in our district. And you could share what you have, and then we could fill in the blanks, and then maybe have some meetings with your office to update your list and then we can

compare notes and try to see what are the issues for each individual post.

I know non-city projects are a big issue, because I've tried to do one and it's, you know, you have to go through a number of hurdles. And unfortunately, you know, they're not going to fund these readily. You know, if they need to complete reconstruction, it's not going to happen unless we step in and help.

So just in collecting data, would you support the creation of a DVS Office of Data Management through legislation? For instance, this would allow your office to compile and analyze data on VSOs, and homeless, veterans and other topics where data analysis is essential to understanding and solving these problems? Would you-- I know, I'm putting-- I'm not going to really put you on the spot, but this is-- this is the information that we desperately need to serve all the veterans.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, thank you so much for the question. I guess the way I'll answer it is: It's not the office that we need, it's the relationship to get the information. You know, when I came in this position, we had, you know, I'd say less than 5,000 veterans' contact information. We

had north of 100,000. One objective is to have almost all veterans contact information. So we'll have it. We have the VSOs, we know how to reach them to the point where we've gotten to the Speaker in the hopes that it is distributed to all councilmembers.

And so it's really the-- it's not necessarily about the office of data management. It's really about the marketing to these folks. For me to animate you enough to even respond when I'm asking for that data is where we are.

And so I feel as though we've built a decent mechanism for learning these things. But if I have all this information about you, yet I am not able to get a response from you when I reach out, I'm not able to get what I need, it's almost like the center of gravity here is-- is that that electrical connection between us within this nervous system, and not necessarily having that office. I hope that answers the question, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I just want to-- But again, I just want to, you know, the communications and obviously services available. But let's-- let's get back to the actual physical brick and mortar of these halls. Because I came across most of them

1 needing advice on insurance. And, you know, you
2 know, with DEP-- I think Paul Vallone knows about
3 this. DEP has a program where they have homeowners
4 insurance. They make-- they make some agreements
5 citywide. So we get, you know, certainly for
6 somebody with issues on-- on their waste lines, or
7 their-- their sewer lines, there's insurance, that's
8 low cost. Could we kind of facilitate some kind of
9 insurance for these-- these halls, if we worked it
10 out with, you know, on a group basis. Because 170
11 halls, if they all got together, and I know it would
12 take some doing. But if we could work with insurance
13 companies to offer lower-cost insurance, like DEP
14 does, could-- could we could we explore that
15 Commissioner?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We can-- We can explore
18 and get back to you, Mr. Chair. When I listen to
19 what you're saying, when I think about the insurance
20 question--

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, I'm talking about what--
22 what DEP does. You know, I don't know if you have it
23 on your home, but if-- I have an older home. It's
24 100 years old. And that's-- it's good insurance to
25 have. Because if-- if a pipe breaks, and, you know,

or especially if it goes to the sewer line, you're responsible, and you've got to dig up the street and all that. So that that kind of insurance would be very expensive otherwise.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think what's complicated with it is, if we explore it, it's something we've do and our capacity as a convener, in other words, in our capacity as a way to say we are able to, you know, bring folks together for those economies of scale to be achieved, not something we would do officially with the imprimatur of the City of New York behind it. I say that because that Veterans, you know, that post, that Lodge, it's different from a home. You've got other things occurring, that you may have a site where, you know, folks are selling alcohol and having, you know, different, you know, performances and things along those lines as far as what's done to rent the space.

And so it's something where if we were to explore it, it would have to be in the context of, you know, we've brought all these different parties together to get to one-plus-one-equals-three, but not something where we, like DEP, can do it officially through the

auspices of the City of New York, if that makes sense.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. But I think a joint insurance program should be explored. No matter-- Let-- Let's look at it. We'll talk-- we can talk as Councilmembers to these companies. And certainly if the city is willing to jump in, we could talk to the appropriate agency. I'm just throwing it out there.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, I get it. I'm also going to point out that for those that receive contracts, folks who go through the discretionary award process that MOCS does have a, you know, a way for folks for whom if you have insurance-- if you have to have insurance to receive that contract from your Councilmember, that-- the Mayor's Office of Contract Services has an existing platform that will help with that for those veteran nonprofits. To be clear, if they're open to exploring it, we just have to be careful with what we do--

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: --in our capacity as the City, versus what we do as able to bring these folks together and let them take advantage of opportunities.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. But just ideas, just
3 like, you know, I want-- I want if your agency could
4 think about it, how it-- can we do it? We'll-- We'll
5 put our heads together, and we'll see if-- if
6 there's-- even in marketing. You know, a lot of
7 these halls don't know how to run, let's say, a
8 catering hall that they have. You know, they could
9 make more money out of it. They could actually, you
10 know, be self sufficient, if they just knew how to
11 market it right, or cater it.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: If I could say something
13 that speaks to that. Something you said, or
14 something that Councilmember Nurse said: At it's
15 heart sometimes too is: We're not that VSO. So it
16 has to be a decision of that leadership. You know,
17 when I was thinking about what you're saying,
18 Councilmember Nurse, and it's the Local Initiative
19 Support Corporation. It is their New York Land
20 Opportunity Program that were working with folks on
21 letting them know about it, just to put it out there.
22 Oftentimes, you may have a Veteran Service
23 Organization that says, "Look, you know, our
24 leadership, our key members here, are in their 70s
25 80s, in some cases, 90s." Option A, we just sell

this place, and put the money in our account, meet elsewhere, but have a cushion for the future. That's option A. That may be easier than option B, which is to go through all the different pieces that involve redevelopment. And so you know, likewise, even with the insurance question, you may have veterans. We can do-- we can to let them know about opportunities, but the group, it's still their decision as far as how they embrace it. And they may, you know-- I just don't want to speak for them.

And then on your question about the business pieces, as far as--

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, or they could merge. Like we've had that, in some of my posts, where the Vietnam vets are renting the upstairs of a Post that includes many wars. They have VFWs from Korea, and the Gulf, and so forth, but that's where they can merge together and they can help one another. That's another option. I just don't want to lose too many of these, and we're losing them, we lost three or four in my district. So I'm trying to hang on, I'm trying to-- But, yeah, you're right, if they could work together and communicate. And they have they have done that.

Just a few more questions. And if my colleagues have any, just let me know. But just-- just in the marketing, what I had mentioned, to help them. And again, sometimes it's just some-- a retired person could jump in who's not a veteran even, but knows how to run a restaurant, or a hall, or a catering. We can do that locally on our level, you know, on the Council level, but it would be nice to-- to ask, and for your office for volunteers with that for advice. And many times, many retired people can't wait to help others, and they want to be-- they want to be useful, and they want to help out. And certainly, you get to feel good-- obviously a feeling of doing something if you're helping veterans, especially people who haven't served.

So just a question, and this is related to your funding.

You know, we heard recently that an additional 4% PEG to city agencies, you know, were handed down and you know, given that DVS is already the smallest and least-funded agency -- and PaulVallone knows this -- how will this affect the Department of Veterans Services and your plan to help our veterans? Because all of the things we talked about, if you're going to

get further cuts, and you know, I don't know the state of-- you know, you could talk about how many lines are still open, and that you have to fill, but then with the PEGs coming down, what is that going to mean to your agency?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So a couple different things. And thank you for that question to Mr. Chair. I don't want to answer that now. I want to come back to something you were saying about the-- just the business opportunities for the veteran organizations. We, you know, we're working with OMB as far as how to navigate these headwinds. That's one piece of it. Another piece of it is our headcount is 35, right now at DVS, and 33 of the 35 positions are filled. One position is advertised right now for someone for our housing and service support team. So someone on our team that works with veterans transition from homelessness into housing, and so that's position is open. Another position that we are looking to fill later this year is tied to the CUNY Pathways program to have someone on who is, through a CUNY program, where that person will be the focus-- focus on affordable housing with us. That program dictates that that next wave will come

out in August, so we're looking to fill all of what we have, as far as attacking our vacancies.

In addition, go to nyc.gov/jobs. Our newsletter, we always list openings there as far as things when it comes to college aid opportunities, or opportunities with job employment at DVS, or even opportunities on the internship side of things with us and that's nyc.gov/vetmedia, or you can go to nyc.gov/vetnewsletter, and you'll get that, and so people can see in that most recent newsletter where we posted this. But to be clear right now we're looking to hire I'm one for our Housing Support Services team. And later this year we'll be looking at the CUNY Pathways program as a way to bring a recent CUNY Graduate in help us with affordable housing.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You'll also take volunteers.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: You know, I want to-- I want to-- I'm going to turn it to Tanya and Ellen about volunteers too, about, you know, some things there with RSVP, with New York Serve, as far as different entities that we plug in with on the volunteer side. I want to also mention, you know, we are doing what we can to avidly seek other

opportunities, as far as VA related opportunities. If we think about grants that we also apply for as an agency. When we look at our you no philanthropic partners, we had great experiences. In your district, at Juniper Park last year, for instance, where donation from the PenFed Foundation allowed us to build more than 200 tables and chairs for formerly homeless veterans.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: A great program, by the way.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So yeah. So we're trying to work-- "one plus one equals three" is something we always say at the agency. And even looking at the, you know, with the VA, things like the VA work-study program to bring in, you know, GI Bill recipients who are currently student veterans to work with us. And so we're always looking for different ways to-- and then HelloFresh with the food as far as having that private entity, which is a reason we've gotten more than a million meals out to veterans. And so we're always trying to find ways to meet mission. We're recognizing these are tough times. I want to just defer to Tanya and Ellen for anything else on the volunteer side.

MS. THOMAS: Also-- Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner. I would like to add that as President of the American Legion Auxiliary, from that hat, I do see that there are plenty of people who just need a vehicle to serve. They want to serve the military community, they just need a vehicle. And we could help with that. We could connect them to assisting the military community through volunteerism. They're open for it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: nyc.gov/VetVolunteer.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. That's great. And are we getting-- we're getting people registered as helping? Because I would love to recruit, like I said, people who have managed restaurants, who are retired, who have managed catering halls, because there's some in my district that have these halls, but they don't really-- they could do more functions and make some money. They do smaller events. But maybe they could do more and make money. But that would be some something that if we could recruit them.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yeah. So my-- my husband was in the restaurant business.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: There you go.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Unfortunately, unfortunately, he's he's passed. But the reality of it is that, yeah, I mean, I grew up where he, you know, he disappeared on Friday nights, because he had a cook that didn't show up. So I mean, I lived that life for a while. Good thing I told him to change his job, to be honest with you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. It's a-- if we could just put the word out.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Yeah. I mean, those-- But again, there has to-- when you're making, you know, this match, you have to make sure that there's a willing partner on-- on the other side. And that's a real sensitive area. And we have to approach that very delicately, to be honest with you.

But I appreciate it. I mean, one of the things that we are using our volunteers for is we're training a number of volunteers to the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, to go ahead and record the stories of veterans who are residing in St. Albans, at the nursing home in St. Albans. And we're in the middle-- middle of training those veterans-- I'm sorry, those volunteers in order to record the stories. So

there are some really wonderful, creative ways in how and how to use volunteers in many cases.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that's great.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Just to give you an example, but yes, I-- you know, certainly for those that wish to learn more about, you know, the-- the how to go ahead. A lot of times the you know, the rentals, at least in my experience, is that they bring in an outside caterer. So they rent the space because that's really affordable. And then they decorate and they rent, and they bring in the outside caterer separately. So it's-- it's kind of an interesting combination, in many cases. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: If I could say two things about the business side of it. Our Veteran Business Leadership Association helps any veteran-led venture, not just for-profit ventures. And so that's NYCVBLA.org. NCCVBLA.org. And so we have folks standing by to provide technical assistance to any who lead a veteran venture, be it a nonprofit, be it a for-profit, be it a 501C-19. And also I'll do my homework, Mr. Chair, to see if we can get SCORE added to our website and if they too will help veteran-related nonprofits. We all know SCORE provides older

mentors for for-profit entities. We can see if SCORE, which is you know, the SCORE NYC chapter, if this is something that look they'd be willing to deal with, because I love what you're saying.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Just-- Even business people, but just-- just to they can raise more money and that's all-- I think there's a lot of areas, and we'll identify, at least our Council offices can do that. Just meet with the posts and see what their greatest needs are, you know, see how they could improve their, you know-- at least fix the building up by-- by turning a better profit. And we'll see if we can reach out, and we'll work on that.

We've been joined by Councilmember Ariola, a member of the committee. And I have one other question. And then I'll turn to my colleagues again, if they have any areas.

The Borden Avenue Homeless-- Veterans Homeless Shelter. I had worked with, and this Committee worked with Commissioner Jenkins when he was here to try to return the board and shelter to individual rooms, where the veterans-- First of all, veterans shouldn't be in a homeless shelter. I mean, that's my feeling. That's most of our-- the feeling of my

colleagues too. They need supportive housing, transitional housing. They need a lot more support, and they don't need congregate shelters. And so we fought. And they used to have individual rooms at Borden, until that-- the City took half of it away that they're running, and only the VA part has the individual room. So Commissioner Jenkins has promised that he was going to change that and go back to the individual rooms to give everyone there, all the veterans privacy. Have you-- DO you have an update on that? Because...

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. Yes, we do have an update. So it's eight weeks at most until completion of that project. So you know, so that is-- it's underway as far as execution of-- of this work.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So eight weeks. We should have it sometime in June, you think?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We've been told, yeah. Because DHS, Department of Homeless Services told us they should be completed within eight weeks.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. All right. Great. So that's good news. And they-- So I guess they ordered it. I'd have to talk to DHS. But I-- And

again, just speaking to the-- to the veterans there, many have served 10, 15, 20 years. And they have something to offer, but they shouldn't be, you know, in a congregate setting. And I said that-- and all of them that I spoke to said the same thing, that they would love to stay in the individual rooms. And I think after serving 15-- and one gentleman, 20 years in the Marines, I think he des-- that's the least he deserves, but he certainly deserves supportive and transitional housing. And I know your office's working hard on that-- that area, too.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: But I want to, since we're talking about this. An issue with Borden that we're dealing with. Thinking through how to attack it-- attack it, is convincing the residents for whom supportive housing is the is the ideal fit, to move into supportive housing. There's a reluctance to it. There's a certain impression that folks have about supportive housing. And we're trying to get the word out to our residents there that, you know, this is not-- you know, not-- not your your mother's supportive housing, your father's supportive housing. That this is a different way to look at this. And so that's its own piece of this puzzle. We have folks

who are reluctant to explore supportive, because their own impressions of what it is. And so that's just something else that's going on underneath the surface that we're working on with our board and community, and with all-- within our shelter community.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. Great. Thank you, Commissioner. Any other questions? Councilmember Nurse?

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Not so much a question. Well, maybe it's a question. We have a property owner that's trying to develop veteran housing over by Broadway Junction. So I'd love to talk with you all about-- they want to do some social services on the bottom, and 100% veteran housing on the top. But actually they're-- some of the challenges is-- is really getting some of the other agencies to move quick enough, so they're not bleeding out money, trying to move these projects.

And so I'm curious, you know, how you all are supporting, when there are projects like that in the works, how you all are kind of jumping in to help these folks navigate city agencies or being an additional support supportive voice on this?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: What we've done in situations like this, councilmember, is it's really-- it's the state program for supportive housing. The Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, where we will always write support letters for those developers who apply. For the past two rounds, round six, round seven, we've written four support letters. Two for each iteration. Ellen will help quarterback that. And so we have at least 250 units in the pipeline that are to be built. And so for us, the way that we typically add value when a developer comes in says, "Hey, look, we want to build supportive for veterans." We say, "Look, if you apply to ESSHI, we will get your support letter," and we send one that is not only included with the application, we send it directly to the ESSHI working group to let them know this is important to us. And so we feel like that's a way we can help add value. Because so far, for each entity for which we have done this, things have worked out. And we work closely with the Supportive Housing Network of New York also, councilmember, to make sure that people know that if you build it, they will come home. We

will help ensure they come as far as a renter. So we're happy to connect further with you--

COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Yeah. I'd love your help in-- in helping to expedite them getting like what they need to get in the pipeline for construction, because they're just bleeding out. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Commissioner and your staff for a great testimony, and let's-- let's continue to work together.

Thank you, Paul Vallone. I hope you're feeling well and you're-- you're back to 100%. See you at the next hearing. Thank you.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREELEY: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We're going to take a five minute break and then we'll call the next panel.

[SIX MINUTES SILENCE]

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you everybody. If everybody can please find their seats, we are ready to resume. Thank you

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, we're back. We're going to call the next panel.

COUNSEL: I would like to remind members of the public that you have three minutes for your

testimony. First Len Williams, Vietnam Veterans Chapter 32.

MR. WILLIAMS: Hello, Hi. Thank you. My name is Lenny Williams. I'm a Vietnam Veteran. I'm representing VVA Chapter 32 out of Maspeth, New York, and also a member of the Khal Alinsky Post, which is the Polish League-- Polish American League Post Number 4 out of Maspeth. We rent prop-- we rent-- we rent space in that chapter.

I have to apologize because I wear hearing aids. I have a 20% disability from the-- from the military, which, you know, it's very hard for me to hear, especially with the echoes and all. I can hear myself very well. Anyway, so a lot of good things I heard, and I'm glad-- I'm in Councilman Holden's district. Well, right outside of it. I live in Sunnyside, Queens, in Councilwoman Paladino's-- in that neighboring district.

I noticed Councilman Holden and Miss Palatino do a lot for the veterans. I only got active with the veterans-- I retired about four years ago. I worked for New York City transit for 40 years. And you know, I don't know where to begin. I heard a lot of good stuff. And you're talking about the Vietnam

Veterans. You're talking about bringing together the young veterans, together with the Vietnam veterans.

Let me just say, you know when I got out of service, they turned around and a lot of us we went about our merry way. And I believe most of the Afghanistan veterans and the Iraqi veterans are doing the same thing. "We don't need the VA we're okay." And we just went about our lives.

Needless to say, you know, when I got out I-- I filed for PTSD and was denied right away. Back then everybody was denied. I had a good friend of mine. He was really in bad shape, lost an eye, you know, really got messed up in battle. He went to the VA and he gave them 40% at that time. And the man was really a mess. And needless to say, during the course of the years, he kept going back, and they finally gave him 100%. I don't know how recent that was, but that's what they He did.

I knew a lot of guys, you know, back then, you know, and I feel sorry for the younger-- younger veterans. Because I knew another guy-- I'll give you-- I've got a million stories, where there's one, he was a hardcore marine, stayed in Vietnam, maybe two tours, came back to United States, and this was

in Forest Hills. And we all hung out in bars. You know, back then we all came-- came home, and we hung out in the bar. And this guy was strapping. This guy would like take on anybody.

He came back, he lasted maybe about a year and a half and he died of cancer. Nobody knows. I don't think-- I'm sure nothing ever happened or that, but this guy, there was no reason you know, to be ill like that. And within about a year and a half after he got out he was dead. And it was-- I'm sure there's only one of many, you know, many-- many things that went on.

Even today the effects of Agent Orange, I'm glad that the Vietnam Veterans of America brought that up, you know, and fought hard to get-- get that in-- in as a disease with this PACT Act. You know, now everybody-- everybody's on board with the PACT Act. They're getting new symptoms, new diseases affiliated with the toxins that are out there, the heavy lead, the heavy-- heavy metals and stuff like that.

You know, it's a shame, I listened again, and we talked about veteran services. It's kind of hard for me. As I said, I didn't get active-- truthfully, I didn't get active with the Vietnam veterans up until

about four or five years ago, more or less at the beginning of the pandemic. I didn't need it. I had a good job, I had good benefits, and so on and so forth. So I-- I kept putting-- "I'm okay. I'm okay. Don't worry about I'm I'm alright." You know, I was denied PTSD, you know, back then. I more or less suffer from survivor's guilt. To this day, if I start thinking about, I feel bad that I survived, and the other guys didn't. Or my friend who got 40% on disability. Excuse me.

But anyway, you know, the big thing today I see is the young-- the young, Afghanistan and Iraqi veterans. They don't know what they're in for with these-- with these dioxins that are around. You know, they-- God forbid that, you know, down 10, 15, 20 years from now they have these diseases, you know, these, I don't know what you would call them due to due to due to the toxins that they-- they encountered. Look-- look at Camp Lejeune. They're going crazy with Camp Lejeune. And that's only one of many. You know, we've-- we've lived through, you know, me growing up, my mother would say, "a little dirt." You used to do the five-second rule. If it fell on the floor, you got five seconds to pick it up

and eat it, and everything would be fine, you know?

But we were so used to, you know, that, and that was our way and that was old school.

But, you know, these days, you know, you're looking at-- you're looking at the Veterans. They-- you don't do enough for veterans. You really you really don't. You know, I just look at it.

As I said, I worked for 40 years, I had my own medical, and so on and so forth. And I didn't need-- I said, "Nah, I don't need the VA. I don't need the medical." Then when-- what happened was when the pandemic hit, I went to the VA to get my-- here's a perfect example. I went and got my COVID shot at the VA at St. Albans. I also asked, "Well, could I bring my wife?" "No, your wife is not covered?" How could that be? You know, you talk about veterans and veteran services, why not spouses? Why not? I have forgot about this: I have two sons from a previous marriage. I have-- My oldest son is 43, from my first marriage, my youngest guy is 33 from this marriage. And both of them had the same Attention Deficit Disorder or speech impairment. There's no history in my whole life, that there's any kind of disorder whatsoever in my medical history, and so on

and so forth. I hope I don't need that. But I went to the VA and I said, "Listen, you know, how could that be? Two wives, two different women, and my sons have the same ailment." "Well, they don't count because they don't-- they're not you. It's not that's not you, so they don't count." That was 30 years ago, 40. So I let it go. And that's one-- that's for my-- my siblings, my kids.

You know, so that was that. And again, as I said, I came into-- I came into the VVA, started getting active. I've been a member for maybe 20 years, only because my wife worked for John Rowan's wife and she enrolled me into the Vietnam Veterans of America, and I paid my dues and so on and so forth.

But when I went to-- when I went to St. Albans, as I said, I got my COVID shot, and I wasn't in the system. Four years ago, three, four years ago, and I've been out of-- I got out of the service in 1971. And, you know, I turned around and, you know, I-- I went in. I got into the system. They gave me a hearing test. They said-- they looked at each other, I swear, they looked at each other said, "Do you think this do you think your hearing is related to your service?" I said, "Well, I drove convoy over in

Vietnam and the artillery shells were going off." I said, "Most likely it started that way." They asked me about ringing in my ears at the time, and I said, "Ringing?" I said, "Boy, I'm way beyond that. You know, forget the ringing in my ears. My ears, I'm just tone deaf, you know." And they looked at each other, and they gave me 20% disability. And, you know, I think it's-- it was a little too late for it. I accepted it, because they gave it to me, and only because of COVID that I did.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But that seems like-- that-- that seems to be a pattern, because I went through it with my dad, a 20 year battle, and he finally got 100% just a couple of years before he passed. And that was a struggle. We'd go down and plead our case and it fell on deaf ears. And eventually we got it.

But like many service members, it's almost too late sometimes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Exactly.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And you told me some stories, I remember talking to you about, you know, your issues and some of the issues of your fellow veterans. You got involved late, but there's a host of issues now with-- with the post.

MR. WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Paying rent, you combined with another post, and it's a very successful post, but they have issues with the building. And I know the space you're renting needs upgrades-- needs to be upgraded. And that's what we're trying to do with this hearing is try to, you know, find out the issues. You got involved relatively, you know, like, I guess within five years, you said, you got involved with the post?

MR. WILLIAMS: Yeah. About four years ago. Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What was the reason why you didn't reach out to a post? You didn't know about it? Or you just thought you didn't need to get together with fellow veterans from the Vietnam war?

MR. WILLIAMS: What happened with us is, like you're saying with the post, if I get into that. Again, I'm going to catch up right now on what the issues are with the post. We moved into Kowalinski post, you know, the Polish post about three or four years ago. And then after the flood, I think it was Hurricane Ida, the name of it was, and I remember you just saying they were under five feet of water. Now they're still suffering. You know, they're still--

you talk about insurance for the posts, so on and so forth.

And I remember talking to the commander of that post, and it's-- it's like \$200,000 in damage and they didn't have insurance because it's a-- it's like a veterans post, you know? And it just cost them to do plumbing. Somebody said about plumbing. It just-- out of pocket, it was \$20,000.

And now also with that, like you're saying membership has dwindled. I think since the pandemic, a lot of Vietnam veterans, they're old, they don't want to come out. They want to do Zoom meetings. So like you're saying is where the membership is dwindling. I belong to the Kowalinski post. I joined that chapter also. And yeah, there-- we go on a monthly basis. And that money is-- They don't have the money. They're nickel-and-dime-ing. And the best thing that ever happened to them, they say, "Thank God that the Vietnam veterans came in," and we help them. We're helping them to survive. And this is-- this Polish post has been in there for 100 years.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

MR. WILLIAMS: You know, and all that stuff.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It was named after a veteran of World War One so it's-- it's over 100 years old.

MR. WILLIAMS: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The post. All right. We thank you so much for your-- your testimony. And again, keep working and I know that just the-- the post continues to help you, just with your-- your veteran colleagues, just-- just to talk, just to talk about the issues that you faced, and you all face together. So we thank you for your testimony.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, I appreciate-- I appreciate what you're doing for Queens and all that, and then Vicki also, Bob, and everybody else.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

MR. WILLIAMS: Thank you for your time. And I could go on for days, you know, about what's going on.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate it.

MR. WILLIAMS: But, you know, there's not enough being done for the veterans themselves.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We know that.

MR. WILLIAMS: Especially what you're saying about Borden avenue. I can get into that. Borden

2 Avenue has been here for 30 or 40 years. And I pass
3 by there on my job almost every day for the last 30
4 or 40 years. And it's a garbage-- it's a garbage
5 dump. Back then. I don't know how it is these days,
6 because you're--

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We're trying to improve it,
8 but we're-- I-- we hope we don't need it. We--

9 MR. WILLIAMS: Well, since you've been at it, but
10 25 or 30 years ago it was it was in shambles.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

12 MR. WILLIAMS: And that's the way it was when I
13 when I was coming through--

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

15 MR. WILLIAMS: --for years. So I wish you-- I
16 thank you very much for your time, and keep up-- keep
17 fighting for us. Please.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

19 COUNSEL: Thank you. Next witness Ryan Graham,
20 District One Department of New York Veterans of
21 Foreign Wars

22 MR. GRAHAM: Okay. Well, my printer broke so I
23 had to email myself.

24 Good afternoon and thank you to the members of
25 the Committee on Veterans and Chairman Bob Holden for

holding this hearing to discuss the state of
veteran's service orgs throughout New York City.

My name is Ryan Graham, Chairman of the
Legislative Committee for District One of the
Department of New York of District One. District
one, my apologies, of the Department of New York is
comprised of 21 VFW posts and over 2000 members.
Having served in conflicts ranging from World War Two
to Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm, Operation
Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom, as
well as smaller combat operations over the prior
years.

Since our inception in 1899, the VFW was
congressionally chartered in 1936, under the
presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and currently
counts 1.2 million members, not including members of
the auxiliary, in thousands of posts across the
United States as well as abroad, throughout Europe,
the Far East, and Central America. The mission of
the VFW is to foster camaraderie among the United
States veterans of overseas conflict, to serve our
veterans, the military, and our communities, and to
advocate on behalf of all veterans.

While not inclusive of the entire population of veterans and posts throughout the five boroughs VSOs also include District Two of the VFW which includes Staten Island, Manhattan, and the Bronx, as well as other organizations such as the American Legion, Catholic War Vets, the VVA, and I could go on and on, who provide nearly identical services to those that served and the communities they belong to.

Over the years, while VSOs continue to thrive in municipalities and towns outside of New York City's borders, organizations such as the VFW continue to see a decline in posts throughout the city.

While infrastructure needs and older buildings need continuous and more frequent maintenance, Veteran Service Orgs are no exception to this compounding problem. Due to noncompliance with rules and regulations, VSOs are unfairly targeted with heavy penalties as if they were a profitable business.

Furthermore, extensive agency red tape, lack of interagency coordination, as well as mismanagement of cases in resolving such issues hinders timely resolution. Ray Ramos (he's going to be on the Zoom), post commander of Queensboro Hill VFW Post

3427 in Flushing, and also a member of our committee for the district, the legislative committee, who himself will be testifying, was a prime example to the years-long issues his posts had closed over.

What started as a non fatal boiler issue ended up with Queensboro Hill VFW draining their accounts and nearly closing their doors for good. Issues such as the Queensboro Hill VFW are not a one-time problem. While some posts continue to struggle due to unfair violations, as if they were a for-profit business, others have unfortunately closed over the prior years due to policies that don't take into account a federally issued 501C-19 nonprofit status.

Just as important, while nonprofit organizations like the VFW do pooling revenue, it is just enough to cover unnecessary overhead costs and programs supporting veterans and communities. When a VFW must pay fine, it reduces its effectiveness and mission.

Besides a need for common-sense policy updates on summonses, policies regarding taxes need to be updated to reflect a nonprofit organization. While some buildings owned by some VFW posts are fully tax exempt, others are not. Full property tax exemption

should be streamlined down from the federal level, and must be reflected in agency codes.

Furthermore, although discretionary funding is open to nonprofit organizations ending every February, the application process is too broad and does not reflect options specifically tailored for VSOs. Largely cumbersome, VSOs are deterred or are unable to apply due to not on relevant upload requirements and requests.

Lastly, it is our belief that with a robust operations, and support services, and programs, the New York City Department of Veteran Services can become a much stronger partner to VSOs throughout the five boroughs.

For the 2022 to 2023 budget, DVS was allocated just under \$6 million, 61st out of 151 budgetary allocated agencies on a \$107 billion budget, well below 1%. When I did the math on that, it was hard to register how far below the total budget. Furthermore, the DVS allotted budget is well below other key unnecessary city agencies and just above fiscal spend for community boards. So this gives you an idea of what DVS is considered as far as compared to other agencies. And it's not just reflective of

just the agency itself, but veterans in general throughout the city.

In addition, an enhancement of DVS services, personnel, and training on VSOs can serve as a streamlined and efficient partner to our organizations, directly or via agency liaisons with other city agencies.

Also, it's also important that other city agencies are trained on nonprofit organizations, not just VSOs. But there are other nonprofits out there.

In conclusion, the approach to fines, taxes, and other lingering issues should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all. Besides updates to rules and regulations, agencies need to be trained and knowledgeable on the differences between for-profit businesses and nonprofit organizations, such as the VFW. VSOs should not be viewed as a revenue stream, but as a community partner, assisting those that served and providing assistance to our long standing record and providing service to our communities.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak today, and following other introductions and testimony, we will have other leadership that will be coming on via Zoom, including the District Commander,

I believe the Chief of Staff for the Department of New York should be on too. We welcome your questions and comments. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So the agencies you were talking about? Department of Buildings?

MR. GRAHAM: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What other agencies should-- should understand who you are as, you know, posts and VFWs, and not a business? What other agencies are-- is it-- do you run into department of finance issues? Do you run into, you know, property tax issues? What-- Tell us-- tell us something a little bit about that.

MR. GRAHAM: Um, well, from what I know, and then like I said, some-- some other people will hop on. Brendan Gibbons. He's also part of the committee. Brendan, he's a post commander out in Mill Village. He's-- he's also pretty-- he's-- he knows taxes pretty well.

But the Department of Buildings that started with Ray Ramos. Department of Finance. Department of Health. I know that's been an issue for a while. I know years ago, there was a post in Forest Hills that

shut down due to-- I can't remember exactly what it was, but just silly violations.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Or Consumer Affairs? You might have--

MR. GRAHAM: Consumer Affairs. Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Now. Did you also run into-- I think you might have mentioned, utilities?

Because we did meet with some of the posts who said they're being charged as a business. Have you-- What responses-- Have you gotten that in your group, where you get charged a greater fee for electricity, because of the address of the post is-- is a business. And we know of a lot of posts just hitting a dead end on that. Which we-- You know, we-- Again, I think there should be a taskforce on this that we can create and iron out all these difficulties. Like a post that has to-- that is in a commercial space should not be charged as a business. You're not money making. You're not making money on the location, you know. Or if you are making money just enough to survive. So I think that-- that's why we really need everybody at the table to really, once and for all solve these issues.

But I know you're going to have a lot of other members testify.

MR. GRAHAM: Oh yes. The utilities-- Actually, I know, the district commander Neil Jordan. He will probably go into detail on that. I know there's been a lot of conflicting information. I know that the utilities for VSOs. We're supposed to be charged at a residential rate, and not a commercial rate. There's also supposed to be information we're supposed to be free.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

MR. GRAHAM: So-- But yeah, that's something that Neil--

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. So we will talk some more. We'll hear from your other members. But thank you so much for your testimony. Any other questions? Okay. Thank you. Thanks so much.

COUNSEL: Next witness, Brendon Gibbons, Haspel Staab, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 551.

MR. GIBBONS: Good morning. Can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We hear you.

MR. GIBBONS: Okay. Good morning. Thank you, Councilmember. Thank you to all the Councilmembers

and Commissioners and everyone else that's there in the committee for having this hearing today.

I myself from the Commander of VFW Post 551, located in Middle Village, New York. I am also a member of the Kawalinsky Post, the Catholic War Veterans Post 870, and American Legion Post 460, all within New York City.

One of the reasons I wanted to be here today to speak was obviously like you brought up the Department of Finance and different agencies, where we really have no connection unfortunately, with the VSOs. It's difficult for us to really speak to them and get you know, information.

For instance, the Department of Finance, if you didn't have that night with the Department of Finance coming over to your office councilmember, I wouldn't be able to have saved, or gotten a higher percentage on property tax for our building. Unfortunately, our post, like most posts in the city have been closing. So way back in 2016, we had to sell our old building that we had, because we had no funding. Fortunately, we were able to purchase another building within the district. And we were able to put some money into it that we had leftover. But what it comes down to is,

just like all the other VSOs, we really have no steady source of income other than donations.

So I know that's one of the things that is the most important thing and talking about different ways that we can receive funding, obviously from the city or any other grants or things that are available.

Other than that, I do appreciate, and thank you very much putting for this bill that would give us the 120-day period if any other violations come in. But like you said, it'd be great to have some sort of taskforce or something to where we'd have a one-stop shop to go to that can speak amongst each other instead of just hitting us with fines, and making it extremely difficult for us with no proper funding, obviously, as a nonprofit.

And the only other thing, mostly, that I wanted to bring up was, the red tape with some of-- with-- with the paperwork is very difficult. And like Ryan brought up, there's issues where most members don't know how to go through it. I've tried myself and I guess like put myself in the category of one of the younger veterans in a veterans organization. But I'm knowledgeable with computers and stuff. But even what I've gone through and tried to look at is

extremely difficult. So any help that we can get throughout the process would be great.

As well, I heard the Department of Veterans Services speak about multiple things. But I can say this: I've been the commander of my posts for 10 years, and I've never ever been contacted by Department of Veterans Services. They mentioned all these different grants or programs that were put up available. Other than looking at their website, in those 10 years, I've never had any contact with them unless it was at a legislative meeting set up through all the VFWs.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank thanks for your testimony, Brenand. This is-- this will change. By the way.

I just want to ask-- and that's why we want to create a task force. But I just want to ask you about just running the day to day operations from the post, Haspel Staab. Tell us about-- You moved into a commercial spot. Are you getting charged for electric rates for a commercial location?

MR. GIBBONS: When I talked to ConEd, initially when we set it up, they told me that it would be the residential rate. I would need to double check to

make sure. Like I said-- Sorry, if you didn't hear me. When I signed-- when we were setting the building up, I did speak to Con Edison and they told me they would put it at residential rates. I do need to double check that to see, but when it comes to-- I just received another letter in the mail from the city. Because we did argue about our property taxes, they sent me a letter stating that we have to fill out by June, because we have a storefront property, that they want to know who is utilizing it, or if we're going to be exempt. Because obviously the city is looking to see if we're making money that they can charge us on. And obviously, we use the storefront ourselves. But we have to fill out something which I've never seen before. We just received that this year. And it states that I must fill it out by June.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, please let-- You know, keep in touch with my office on this. We'll work on it together. And we'll see-- And we'll also meet with-- I don't know if your-- your heating is with national grid, or we'll work that out. And we'll try to get you the services that you certainly need, and any other information that you're having trouble with just-- just-- You know, we're not that

far. You're not that-- and again, you've-- you've contacted my office several times, and we'll work together to try to get-- get over some of the hurdles. But thank you. Thank you for your testimony.

MR. GIBBONS: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks so much.

COUNSEL: Next witness is Neil K. Jordan, Veterans of Foreign Wars.

MR. JORDAN: Yes, good afternoon, Commissioner and Committee. I heard a lot of talk about the electric bills. First, um, let me introduce myself. My name is Neil Jordan. I'm the District Commander for the VFW. I'm also the post commander of VFW Post 1896, and post commander of American Legion Post 1946.

The utility bills: Under Public Service Law 76 (you can have your staff look that up, Commissioner), in that law it states that no utility entity, such as electric, gas, or water shall charge a VFW posts or any veteran organization a bill. That's basically what it's saying. In my fight with Con Edison on this, Con Edison actually acknowledged it. And they actually prorated my bill for one year, where they

went back and reviewed my bill, the bill for my American Legion Post, and they went back and change it to a residential bill.

Now, I am trying to do the same thing with National Grid for both my electric and gas. And I'm hitting a roadblock on that right now. But I'm making it available-- I have made it available to all my posts that they need, and also available to the Queens Borough president, and the four posts we tried to get together where we could tackle this as a community of VSOs.

The grants, capital grants: I know that capital grants, the state has a \$5 million budget allocated for just veterans. But in order to get the grant, you have to spend the money, and that's where the problem is. The posts don't have the money to spend, and then apply for these grants to get them. So in a Catch 22 situation there. If there's some way we can-- You know, we can-- if we can find friendly, how should I say, people in construction that are able to wait for their money until after we receive our grant to do the work, that would be great.

I got a view-- Somewhat of a view. I heard that the state budget-- I know you may not have anything

to do with that, but right now, the state budget that's been proposed as far as they're looking to cut \$125,000 away from our service officers. That's going to be a hard hit.

Actually, I have a form letter that is going to go out to my posts to give to their elected officials to let them know that we can't have this.

There was a big issue a couple of years ago about the VA closing. That has not gone away. And I hope DVS and your committee would stay on top of this. They're still-- they're still looking to close the St. Albans and Manhattan Vas, or refurbish them as they-- as they claim. But that still has not gone away. That is still a part of the table that is being done in in in a small way.

One of the other agencies that you were asking Ryan about would be the Parks Department. I just had to shell out over \$10,000 to the Parks Department for trees, because I renovated my building. And part of their law was that the city thing is that we have to plant trees every 25 feet because of our walkway. I have no area in front of my building to park-- to plant the trees. But they said, well, since you don't have the area to plant it now you have to pay

for the trees anyway, and we'll plant them wherever we see fit. I can't even choose it where I want to plant the trees that I have to pay for. So I just had to shell out over \$10,000 for trees. I have no idea where they are.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Hold on just one second, Mr. Jordan. You paid that already? You paid the 10,000?

MR. JORDAN: Yes, I did. My-- My post happened to be one of the more, how shall I say it, lucky posts in the-- My post is-- My post is one of the lucky posts in the in the district. We had veterans that took care of investing money, and made sure that the veterans coming behind them had something to work on. And that's what we-- and that's where we got the money from. Right now we're going through a renovation. We've been going through it now for about six years. And it's one thing after another with these agencies and trying to get my post reopened again. Right now we just had another inspection this morning from the Fire Department. I'm hoping it's the last one. So-- I don't know. I'm hoping to be open for-- by Memorial Day.

What else? Basically that is it. Like I said, I-- I support a lot of veterans. I know Tanya. I--

I have for VSOs in my area: Post 1946, 1893, 5298 which is another VFW Post, and 483. And we also work sort of close together here in the Southeast Queens areas. We also support the food pantries. I know most of you all know retired Major Sharon Lindsey. She has four food pantries here in this area that support veterans. I also managed one of those pantries for her out here in my neighborhood.

So I'll sit around and wait for any questions that you may have. But otherwise, that that is my testimony right now.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much Mr. Jordan. By the way, on the electrical, I remember you telling me about that. That you were paying-- When we did meet, you told me that you were paying commercial rates at that location. And so that's why we brought this up. And we this hearing was really-- to really help your organizations, but I just want to thank you for all the work you do for veterans. I mean it's tireless work. But just the fact that you run into this bureaucratic red tape for like, for instance, for the Parks Department or for utilities. That shouldn't be. And so I would say in the future,

please reach out to my office, and this Committee, and to DVS so that we can help you.

And I would have reached out to the Parks Department, had I known, and I think all the Councilmembers here would have also to say, "Look, you can't make the VF-- You can't make the this post spend \$10,000 on trees that are going in other locations." And that's what-- that's essentially what's happened here.

So we'll look into that. And this-- these-- this is exactly what I'm talking about. And I thank you for educating me last year about the situation, so that we could-- we could try to remedy it, and you won't have-- in the future have to deal with this. But certainly with the utilities, and we-- we could certainly act on your behalf. But more importantly for city agencies, we can certainly, and so can DVS fight these regulations that really shouldn't pertain to, again, your posts, that you're working hard. Like you said, you're doing food pantries, you're doing veteran services on a constant basis, and you're facing so many hurdles, and you should never have to pay \$10,000 for trees. And we'll certainly talk to the Parks Department about that one. But

thank you, Mr. Jordan. Thanks for all your work.

Thanks for your testimony.

MR. JORDAN: Thank you.

COUNSEL: Next witness, Kimberly Moon.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Press the press the button.

Okay.

DR. MOORE: Good afternoon, Chairperson Holden, Councilmembers, esteemed colleagues. Thank you for the Committee on Veterans for the honor and privilege to testify before you today. My name is Dr. Kimberly Moore, Director of the Care Café program at Yeshiva University Wurzweiler School of Social Work. Care Café is our community-based program, providing psychoeducational pop-up support cafes throughout the New York metro area. Our students and faculty have pioneered a targeted model of embedding Care Café programs in local community institutions. A portion of Care Café's funding is designated for Veterans Services. Over the last year, the Care Café program has strengthened and expanded our partnerships with a goal of effectively engaging with service members and veterans across various areas of health promotion, including but not limited to suicide prevention, psychoeducation, training series, psychological first

aid, life transitions, career exploration, and nutrition. However, connecting veterans, service members and their families to the necessary services and entitlements still continues to be a challenge due to their unidentified status. The question remains: Where are the veterans?

To this end, it is essential that proactive efforts to outreach service members and veterans within and across a wider range of networks must remain a priority. By focusing on a process of pre-screening at all levels of service, not just at a program intake session. The propensity to identify service members and veterans may increase significantly, and support minimizing service delivery gaps across the spectrum. As practitioners, we are reminded that screening and assessment are ongoing activities.

One of our strongest allies has been the Bronx Vet Center, whose members have attended several community events, engage veterans and service members, and jointly organized efforts to support them with getting needed care on the spot. Some of these outreach efforts have been on the street, at

faith institutions, at day programs and on site at residential shelters.

Additionally, while utilizing research methodologies, such as focus groups, and conducting organized and targeted these assessments at various points in time across programming, service providers' knowledge can be expanded and informed by the expert testimony of the service member or veteran populations which drive service delivery.

It is important to note that special attention has been given to collaborative planning, designing, and implementation of programming within the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, and our veteran survey community partners. These efforts have included offering instruction around the theoretical foundations of social work, group practice, such as empowerment and mutual aid models, which serve to ground and streamline peer-based programmatic strategies more effectively. As practitioners and community based organizations, an opportunity exists for us to provide services grounded and strength-based foundations, utilizing peer-centered approaches, active listening, and express empathy. We see time and time again the values of togetherness

and eagerness to learn, and the manifestations of the proverb "each one, teach one" as a model for connecting people, promoting strength, and resiliency.

Finally, during this special time, we also acknowledge the 20th anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom, remembering the more than 4000 service members who gave their lives and more than 30,000 wounded during battle. We are reminded about the bravery and sacrifices of each of them. We also remember the loved ones of our fallen service members who are still with us. We remember. It is with clarity and acknowledgement that we continue to advance toward improving the efforts to serve service members and veterans. You are not forgotten.

Finally, on behalf of the Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work Care Café program, we thank you for this opportunity to share at today's meeting, and we look forward to continuing to serve the greater community at large. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for your excellent testimony. How many employees do you have, workers in your office?

DR. MOORE: Well, we have me, the director of the program, and we have the wonderful students of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work MSW program and PhD program, who serve and assist with facilitating our program.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Do you have evening hours, because some of the students are going in the evening. Because I taught in a university, CUNY.

DR. MOORE: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And our in our campus, we didn't always have weekend-- we had weekend classes, but not weekend personnel working the veterans office or evening, so they missed that. Do you have--

DR. MOORE: Yes, we do. We have programming during the day, in the evening, and on the weekends, and our services for the Care Café program are during the day, on the evening, and on weekends as well.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And how many students do you serve, do you think per semester? Do you have a number on that?

DR. MOORE: Yes. My program has about four students. We're going to be expanding now to about 10 for this program because of the needs, but we're continuing to grow, and we want to make sure we raise

awareness about our program services to help program infrastructure.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Again, thank you for your service.

DR. MOORE: Thank you so much.

COUNSEL: Next witness Peter Kempner, Volunteers of Legal Services Inc.

MR. KEMPNER: Good afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner. I'm the Legal Director of Volunteers of Legal Service, also known as VOLS. VOLS is a Veterans Initiative, which is part of our senior law project that strives to empower older New York veterans to be able to age in place with dignity and respect. We do this by providing them the ability to plan for the future. We draft last wills and testaments, powers of attorney, healthcare proxies, living wills, and other advanced directives for our clients. These documents enable our clients to be able to make their dying wishes clear, empower their caregivers, and make sure that they're able to live and thrive in the community for as long as possible.

We also value strong community partnerships. The Veterans Initiative provides support and training to social workers, healthcare providers, 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 the veteran population here.

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, approximately 50% of New York State's veterans are over the age of 60, and when you add veterans who are aged 50 and over that number rises to two thirds.

About 43% of the veterans in the state are from the Vietnam era, the Korean War era, and World War Two era.

And this past week, we just marked the 50th anniversary of the last US troops withdrawing from Vietnam, which makes the youngest Vietnam era veterans 68 years old.

These numbers are why our Veterans Initiative focuses our work on providing 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 technology and comfort with that technology in order to be able to access those 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 also became socially isolated. According to the National Council for aging, COVID-19-driven social isolation has increased risks of depression, cognitive decline, and dementia. In addition, social isolation may also have an impact on physical health and the ability to complete activities of daily living. All of these factors will impact older veterans' ability to continue to live healthy lives and the communities.

If we're concerned about the mental and physical health of our ageing veteran population, we need to ensure that they have physical locations where they can connect with other members of their community and to access critical services. For some veterans, this

means attending meals and programming at local older adult centers. For other veterans, this means connecting with fellow veterans at VFWs and American Legion halls, and some will go to vet centers in their borough or to other VSOs with physical locations.

Wherever 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 most meets their needs and desires. We know the problems of social isolations could 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 Council for holding this hearing, and continuing to invest in services and programs to make New York City a place where veterans feel welcome and at home. The many organizations and services that are supported by the council's veterans initiatives are critical to this shared goal. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Peter. And again, this-- this service that you provide our veterans is so, so important. And I can understand even, you know, with the pandemic, that you aren't

unable to get around as much and obviously didn't go into meetings. So there's catch up that has to be done.

MR. KEMPNER: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So I hope there's, like, a lot more of you out there that we can really clone and get-- get, because sitting through-- you know, by the way, you gave a seminar in my office, which was wonderful. And if we can do one for veterans at some of the posts, and I know you've been doing it, and we can expand it in the Council, we will certainly work on that. And so if you let us know what we can do to expand the program to do catch up on the pandemic, we certainly appreciate it. So we'll talk.

MR. KEMPNER: Yes, absolutely. We'd love to make that connection.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I thank you for your great, great service to not only, you know, our districts but also particularly to the veterans. Thanks so much.

MR. KEMPNER: Thank you.

COUNSEL: Next witness, Deidre Rice-Reese.

MS. RICE-REESE: Good afternoon, Council and Chair. I'm Deidre Rice-Reese. I'm the Assistant

Vice President of Residential Treatment for Samaritan Daytop Village. Push it a little closer? Is it on? Okay. I'm also USA Air Force veteran. So I've work for Samaritan for the past 12 years. And what it takes for veterans suffering from substance use disorder and mental health issues are layers of coping skills, strategies, healing, and supports. And namely, with City Council's help, we've been able to develop programs like a Veteran's Pride Pilgrimage, where we traveled to Washington DC and do a historical and reflective Cost of Freedom tour. Transcendental Meditation. We work with TM. Equestrian therapy through Serenity Stables, art therapy, performance art, music (Voices of Valor is one of the organizations that we've worked), Theater of War, who does acting in support for the veterans in program, Broadway (we work with TDF to get tickets to Broadway), physical therapy that's not prescribed like sailing, and rowing, and rucking, and running, family reconnections through family associations, doing alumni connections with our programs as well as the New York State alumni through veterans, working with DVS, working with Care, who just said, and

Wurzweiler who came in to talk about their Care Café, which is fantastic.

All of those are in addition to the many evidence-based practices that we use to help veterans restore order to their lives from addiction, from mental health issues or breaks. We have Seeking Safety, which is a coping skills group, which helps with PTSD, relapse prevention, anger management, wellness self-management, and, you know, a myriad of other mindfulness exercises.

We have vocational supports to help restore order and productivity. We include resume writing, interview techniques, and job search and internships. We also often have to get clothing and shoes and digital access for our veterans. Samaritan is a pioneer in veteran services for those with substance use disorders and mental health issues. We've been around for over-- well, we started in 86. We serve thousands of veterans. We have the capacity to manage over a hundred veterans at any given time in New York City. We have programs in Queens and Manhattan. We have three facilities dedicated to, specifically to serving veterans. One, which is a

premier women's veterans program. We are proudly serving a network of veterans.

During the pandemic, we were able to keep our doors open, and embrace those veterans who needed help with alcohol and substance use disorders despite the pandemic. We successfully isolated many of them, brought them back into treatment. We used hotelling when necessary. No veteran in our residential system passed away because of the pandemic. So we're very proud of that. None.

We invested in digital access, so we had social distance, we were able to continue programming while they were inside without putting them at risk.

As an Air Force veteran and a person of long-term recovery over 30 years, I have firsthand knowledge of being able to utilize services that are specific to military culture, that helps with restoring structure and order, de-stigmatize a veteran having gone through care or need care, not being afraid to ask for care.

The Council has supported us over the years by offering additional supports, funding support for some of the activities that we propose. We-- We build a culture of recovery. We include alumni of

the program so that they come back to us. We have an Alumni Elite activity, which is five years after they were in treatment and in recovery, they come back and they embrace sort of their peers.

And we have a Legends and Legacy group. So Legends are those who are the-- among the older group and the Legacy are those OEF/OF, the younger folks that are coming out that have struggled with addictions or mental health issues.

Less than 10% of the United States population have served in the military. Before OEF/OIF, it was 7%. To say that we need to take time to-- take time and support funds to embrace those who struggled with addiction and/or mental health issues, embrace them and support them in their healing is something that is incumbent upon all of us.

I'm proud of my service, but it's always nice to be acknowledged for having gone through so much, but persevered.

So, Samaritan asks for you to continue to support us, and I'm happy that I had this chance to testify.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, it's amazing the amount of work you guys are doing. It's-- it's terrific. But tell me some of the programs that you

feel need to be expanded in Samaritan. Because there's-- there's so many. How do you-- With all the years that you've been, you know, associated with them, what works? What needs to be expanded in that area?

MS. RICE-REESE: Right. So now, especially because of the pandemic and the transition to more of a digital access opportunity, making sure that veterans have access and have training for using technology to access services and care. And then our younger veterans are really more into the digital world. So like, the VSOs are wonderful. However, having a brick-and-mortar is less attractive than having a platform that we can interact at a distance, not by isolation, but maybe just even a game night. So while we have bingo around that's-- that's for us older folks. They want PlayStation 5, they-- they want, you know, other activities that are going to engage them. And-- And we have to be on top of it quickly. It's just like they only-- the attention span is very, very short. So you want to engage them, connect them well, and encourage them that it's a good thing that they are a veteran that-- make them proud of it. So expanding the pride trip, our

pilgrimage, expanding the activities like rowing, rucking, marathons, they run, they you-- know being a part of a gym, and then getting awards. They-- They recognize and appreciate-- I say "they". WE-- I'm going to go younger, WE recognize and appreciate being acknowledged and rewarded for our competitive spirit. Winning is important to-- to younger folks.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's so important to have a veteran head this program and be associated with it. How long did you-- You served in the Air Force?

MS. RICE-REESE: I was Air Force for four years active and two years reserve.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow. So valuable. Thanks so much for your wonderful program and for coming to testify today. Thank you so much.

MS. RICE-REESE: And it's always a tough act to follow Commissioner Hendon.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well he's here listening. He's amazing.

MS. RICE-REESE: No no. He always is. So thank you all for having me. I appreciate you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. She has-- Councilmember Paladino has a question.

MS. RICE-REESE: Absolutely. Councilwoman Paladino, I have to say, I love your boots too. Sorry, I had that.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: What's that?

MS. RICE-REESE: I love your boots. They're fabulous.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: I'm getting a lot of wear out of them this year. I want to say thank you. I absolutely love Samaritan. And I had no idea about you servicing the veterans.

MS. RICE-REESE: Yes.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: You see me leaning in. I'm intrigued by what you had to say. When it comes to the drug-addicted, and the mental health that strikes a note personally with me. So I'd like to say thank you. And I'd like more information. Because going forward, this is very worthwhile. Where are you located in Queens?

MS. RICE-REESE: in Queens, we are in Richmond Hill, 89th road and 130th. And in Manhattan on 43rd Street. So right down the street from Times Square, 43rd between 8th and 9th.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: And this is going on for 30 years?

MS. RICE-REESE: This is-- Since 1986.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Fantastic. And I love the fact you said "Legends", and "Legendary".

MS. RICE-REESE: "Legends" and "Legacies."

COUNCILMEMBER PALADIN: "Legacies." Yes.

MS. RICE-REESE: So the younger folks are the legacy that we hope to leave, and connecting them, you know, just having them mentored and supported, and separating them at least so that when they're acknowledged they recognize their service and the distinctions between the two.

COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Fantastic, thank you very much. I want more information.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great program. Thank you so much for your testimony.

COUNSEL: I would now like to take a moment to note that written testimony, which will be reviewed and full by committee staff may be submitted to the record up to 72 hours after the close of this hearing, by emailing it to testimony@council.nyc.gov.

We will now move on to remote testimony.

Once your name is called, a member of our staff will unmute you and you may begin your testimony wants to Sergeant at Arms sets the clock and gives

you the cue. Your testimony will be limited to three minutes. Please wait for the Sergeant At Arms to announce that you may begin before you start your testimony.

First witness is Chief Master Sergeant Retired, Edward Schloeman, Operation Warrior Shield.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

MR. SCHLOEMAN: Thank you for the opportunity to introduce our foundation. And to those who may not know of us, I've been around doing this work for the last 13 years. Our mission is to heal the hidden wounds of our heroes. And we do this through a great partnership with the David Lynch Foundation of providing free of charge Transcendental Meditation, which you just heard how much we have done with other-- other organizations, especially those who are addicted. And I also have a great partnership with the Doris Day Animal Foundation, and providing companion animals.

So I'm happy to say that these programs are a complete success, and we wish to encourage this council to support us within not only the City Council, but with the opportunities that would put us more out into the veteran community.

The support is by letting your base know that we are here for them, and to ask your office for any financial support for this great movement that we're doing.

We would like to build a list of those who may wish to have a dog, or to learn TM. And my contact is my name. ESchloeman@AOL. So now I can hold the rest of my short presentation to any questions that you may have.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Ed. And, you know, I'd like to hear more about this program. Because we certainly-- I mean, we could actually help not only the animal, but of course the veteran, and you do-- how many veterans do you serve per year in your program?

MR. SCHLOEMAN: Well, I'm happy to say that we probably hit 100,000 veterans to learn TM since I first brought that in, in the year 2010, with the great Jerry Yellen-- or the late, great Jerry Yellen, the World War Two veteran, and TM has been a lifestyle and all of the military services as well as the VA hospitals throughout the country. So we're proud of that.

And I got involved with the animal side, when I saw how important the-- an animal can give emotional to support. And even though we're this is a veterans conversation here, I am working with NYPD Health and Wellness also in providing recovery dogs for this.

Presently we have given out 10 so far. And we take them from the Southampton Animal Society, train them for a few months, and we're definitely making a difference. And, you know, like I told you many, many years ago, what kept me going was a young Lance Corporal who served in Iraq. And he said to me, "You know, Chief before I met you, suicide was my only option." So those kinds of comments I'm hearing again as I give someone a wonderful companion.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's a great story. Thank you so much, Ed, for your service, and we'll be in touch definitely about expanding your funding. Thanks so much.

COUNSEL: Next witness, Helen Thurston, the Evergreen Cemetery Preservation Foundation.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time has begun.

MS. THURSTON: Hello. Thank you for the opportunity to talk. Thank you, Commissioner Holden. Thank you, Commissioner Hendon. And thank you

Councilmember Sandy Nurse, and the other members of this distinguished committee.

The Evergreen Cemetery has an important veterans training program to present to you, that will take veterans, give them career opportunities with long-lasting benefits and career paths in the green future industries. These are jobs that are available presently and hard to fill in New York City, with the city Departments of Parks, with not-for-profits that have landscaping around them, with commercial organizations, with entrepreneurial opportunities for veterans. These are positions in which a veteran can either excel on the team, excel as a manager, excel as a foreman, excel in entrepreneurship, and we are ready to go with this program. We are looking forward to hiring 20 veterans with paid internships.

This program was brought to us by Commissioner Hendon, and it's truly a way to help veterans transition from active service to long-term employment with benefits.

I'm happy to answer any questions you might have about this program. It will take place on 225 acres of beautiful land in Brooklyn and Queens. It will serve veterans who live in Brooklyn and Queens. We

are also open to all veterans throughout the city. And it would be our great honor to serve in this capacity. Any questions?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it sounds like a great program. Tell me a little-- Why is it-- is it a funding issue that only 20 can apply? Because it seems to me that many city agencies could use personnel. And we should start with veterans, I would think.

MS. THURSTON: This program provides introductory training in landscape design and outdoor green careers. So the veterans themselves, veterans of all genders, will be working outdoors learning how to manage a landscape. So they will be under the supervision of the Davie Institute, which is a national company that does already provide training to youth. And they're going to be now transitioning to this program, providing to veterans. So you have-- We're running heavy equipment, you're running light equipment, you're learning college material about planting, shrubs, trees. It is intensive, and so therefore it is 10 veterans to each instructor.

There will also be soft services like how to do a resume, how to interview, how to give an elevator

speech, how to believe that you can transition from the military to the civilian career.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. As somebody who taught in college for 40 years, I always found my veteran students to be not only more mature, obviously more experienced, but they worked really, really hard. So it sounds like a successful program, and we should look to expand it. But thank you so much for your testimony. Thank you.

MS. THURSTON: Thank you very much for this opportunity, and a special shout out to Paul Vallone for his support, and assistance and to Commissioner Hendon, and Ellen Greeley.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: He's here.

MS. THURSTON: Oh. Thank you so much to Councilmember Sandy Nurse, who's actually been to visit. We would like to invite you all to come and visit, but a really big shout out to Councilmember Sandy Nurse.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for that. Thanks so much. Thanks for your testimony.

COUNSEL: We have now heard from everyone who has signed up to testify. If we inadvertently missed anyone who would like to testify in person, please

visit the sergeant's table and complete a witness slip now. If we inadvertently missed anyone who would like to testify virtually, please use the raise hand function on Zoom, and I will call on you in the order of hands raised.

Next witness Mr. Raymond Ramos.

MR. RAMOS: Thank you, Committee. Chairman Holden, Commissioner Hendon, the Councilmembers, and the entire Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak briefly. As many of you already know, my post, I'm the Commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3427 in Flushing, Queens, and I was part of the Victimization of the Department of Buildings.

And so when you talk about a task force, I think agencies such as the DOB needs to be investigated for the practices utilized in our situation where we spent over \$20,000 of money that could have gone to veteran services and servicing the community to an agency that was unwilling to help us get through the situation. I made calls, and I could get no answers. If it were not for the current situation that we have, with Tauris Tech coming in, and spending \$300,000 of their own money to rebuild our post, we

would-- I would not be here before you this afternoon.

And even when they came on board, we had an amnesty period where the Department of Buildings-- when we said we had no more money, took the last \$750 we had only to find out in 2022, they had an additional \$6,000 in fines that we knew nothing about. These things need to stop. I don't know if it was part of any kind of development, predatory actions utilizing a city agency to go after and target a Veterans of Foreign Wars post, but it's something that really needs to be looked into.

Now we are currently energy efficient. We no longer use gas. We are fully electric due to Tauris Tech. They would like to do that with a lot of the VFW posts, as well as provide training in HVAC and getting veterans opportunities to be trained to get jobs.

We currently are dealing also with Con Edison to the tune of \$12,000, having to call, and navigate, and get no answers, and still be held with these hefty fines is unheard of. We are currently on some sort of a payment plan.

Also with-- with the IRS and the Department of Finance. With all that went on from 2015, when I took over as commander and inherited a situation that I had no knowledge of. I had a CPA who had to refile for 501C-3. IRS is currently saying that we have no record of six years of tax returns. And thus now, we're waiting to hear back from them, because they've taken away our tax-exempt status.

We need advocates. We need people that we can go to when such situations like this happen and kind of help us navigate and get through these processes.

I heard a lot about you know, as I was listening about young vets. Young vets don't want to have places where they can sit and drink. Young vets need services.

I want to be able to open my post and be able to have it utilized by the Veterans Administration to have veterans have a place where they can come and apply for their claims, so they don't have to go all the way to Manhattan. We can do food pantries for the communities, things of that nature. Young vets are gravitating to Wounded Warriors, because there are a lot of programs and projects and the outreach.

Wounded Warriors comes after you, they seek you, and they provide you the services that you need.

In terms of the housing. We were one of the posts, when we were going through a lot of this. I know Helen Greeley knows a lot about it. We were one of the posts that were very interested in having that. But what we wanted to know, what a lot of members wanted to know, is what would be the benefits of the post? How would they see monies from affordable housing beyond-- on their post? What would be-- Like I said, what would be the revenue? What would be the amount of housing going to veterans? It's one thing to have affordable housing, but how much of that housing will go to veterans?

So these are the kinds of questions that were asked by my membership, and I'm quite sure, a lot of the other veterans' memberships.

So my biggest thing is, these issues in terms of city agencies not being available or helpful enough to help us navigate when things happen. When situations arise, that need to be repaired, we need to get the education on it, so that we can do what we need to do.

I don't, I don't want any of the posts to ever have to go through what we had to endure from 2015 to 2022. And I thank you for this opportunity to speak.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, Ray, I want to thank you, because it was your advocacy that helped with-- to draft the bill to try to not have this happen to other posts, what happened to you.

And you're one of the really-- real people that forced this hearing, by the way, you know, because of your work.

So that's why we have to talk very more often. And, you know, I've spoken to you a few times. But this is the kind of advocacy we need. And how do we cure these problems? How do we work on-- on this. It's not really-- You were dealing with bureaucrats. You were dealing with an agency that just sees you as another location. They're not really seeing the work that you do. And that's what we need, we need more-- You know, we need-- we need all our agencies to be more compassionate, and actually treat our veterans a little more special in their locations, so you don't go through this, and you don't have to throw money away, and that we can really cut-- cut to the chase.

So, Ray, I've got to thank you for all you've done so far and continue to do so. Let's meet more often. But let's-- let's hear some ideas for more legislation. And that's what I'm here for. Thank you so much.

COUNSEL: Seeing no one else I would like to note again that written testimony, which will be reviewed in full by committee staff, may be submitted to the record up to 72 hours after the close of this hearing, by emailing it to testimony@council.nyc.gov.

Chair Holden, we have concluded public testimony for this hearing.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And thank you all for your testimony. Excellent hearing, I think. And thanks Commissioner Hendon for certainly hanging in there, as usual, and your staff. It was an eye-opening hearing. And we thank everyone. And this hearing is closed.

[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 04/13/2023