

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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March 25, 2024
Start: 10:05 a.m.
Recess: 12:45 p.m.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:
Joann Ariola
Kristy Marmorato
Sandy Nurse
Vickie Paladino

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

James Hendon
Department of Veteran Services Commissioner

Jason Loughran
Department of Veteran Services Senior Advisor of
Intergovernmental Affairs

Lamarr Wheeler
Department of Veteran Services Director of
Housing Support Services

Erin Verrier
Community Healthcare Network

Timothy Pena
Forgotten Veteran

Marcos Stafne
Executive Director at GallopNYC

Cleopatra Brown
Community Board 16 Veteran Affairs Committee
Chair

Jeanine Costly

Peter Kempner
Volunteers of Legal Services

MJ Okma
SAGE Vets

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

Deirdre Rice-Reese
Samaritan Daytop Village

Coco Culhane
Vet Advocacy Project

Brendan Gibbons
VFW

Kimberly Moore
Care Café

Leonard Williams
Vietnam Vets of America

Laurie Sutton

Edward Schloeman
Operation Warrior Shield

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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and
3 welcome to the New York City Council Preliminary
4 Budget hearing on Veterans. At this time, can
5 everybody please silence your cellphones? If you wish
6 to testify, please go up to the Sergeant at Arms desk
7 to fill out a testimony slip. At this time and going
8 forward, no one is to approach the dais. I repeat,
9 no one is to approach the dais. Thank you for your
10 cooperation. Chair, we are ready to begin.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sergeant.
12 [gavel] Good morning and welcome to the Preliminary
13 Budget hearing for the Committee on Veterans. I'm
14 Robert Holden, Chair of the Committee. Today's
15 committee hearing is on the Fiscal 2025 Preliminary
16 Budget and the 2024 Preliminary Mayor's Management
17 Report, or PMMR, for the City's Department of
18 Veterans Services or DVS. I want to welcome James
19 Hendon, Commissioner of the Department of Veterans
20 Services and his staff to testify before this
21 committee. Thank you for coming, Commissioner, and
22 we appreciate your presence and all the hard work you
23 put in to the DVS. I would like to acknowledge my
24 fellow Council Members who have joined us, Kristy
25 Marmorato and Joann Ariola. Fiscal 2025 Preliminary

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2 Budget for DVS totals \$5.2 million including \$3.5
3 million in personnel services funding to support 37
4 fulltime positions and \$1.7 for other than personnel
5 services. As the Preliminary Plan, DVS Fiscal 2025
6 budget is \$456,175 or eight percent less than the
7 current budget of Fiscal 2024. Preliminary Plan did
8 not include any significant changes to DVS' budget,
9 notably, just at just over \$5 million. The Fiscal
10 2025 budget for DVS really consists of less than one
11 one-hundredth of the City's total Fiscal 2025 budget,
12 making it one of the smallest, if not the smallest of
13 all city agencies. I strongly feel that we owe it to
14 our City's valued veteran community to do a better
15 job in supporting their specific needs, which means
16 DVS needs adequate funding. There are areas where
17 the City's veteran lag behind the national average
18 and the City needs to step up to address this. I was
19 very disappointed to see that DVS was included in the
20 Mayor's PEG program and that funding was reduced in
21 the November Plan by \$239,000 in Fiscal 2024,
22 \$236,000 in Fiscal 25, and \$238,000 in Fiscal 26.
23 Thankfully, DVS was exempt from additional cuts in
24 the Preliminary Plan. However, I would like to see
25 the previous PEGs restores in the Executive Plan as

1
2 there are many areas of needs this funding could help
3 address. Today, I look forward to discussing DVS'
4 budget and operations budget actions that were
5 included in the November Plan, staffing at the
6 agency, the City support services for veterans, and
7 reviewing DVS' metrics reported in the Fiscal 2024
8 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report. I am
9 particularly interested in hearing how DVS is coming
10 up with innovative ways to address the mental health,
11 housing insecurity, employment, and social service
12 needs of our City's veterans. I want to thank both
13 my staff and the committee staff for their help in
14 preparing for this hearing, Ross Goldstein, Financial
15 Analyst, Julia Haramis, Unit Head, Regina Paul,
16 Policy Analyst, and of course my Chief of Staff,
17 Daniel Kurzyna. Now, I'd like to turn it over to
18 Regina Paul to administer the oath and swear in our
19 representatives. Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Commissioner James
21 Hendon, Jason Loughran, Lamarr Wheeler for the
22 Department of Veteran Services, please raise your
23 right hand. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the
24 whole truth and nothing but the truth in you
25

1
2 testimony before this committee and to respond
3 honestly to Council Member's questions?

4 UNIDENTIFIED: I do.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. As a
6 reminder to all of our witnesses, please state your
7 name prior to your testimony for the record.
8 Commissioner, you may begin.

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you. Before
10 I begin, this is the first hearing we've held since
11 the loss of a member of our team, former City Council
12 Member and former Deputy Commissioner for DVS, Paul
13 Vallone. Just like to take a moment of silence to
14 recognize him. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you,
16 Commissioner, for saying that. By the way, he
17 bridged the-- there was no gap between the City
18 Council and your office. We're a very close-knit
19 community in that area for our veterans, but Paul
20 bridged that gap if there was ever one. He really--
21 he was part of us. I served with him for four years
22 in the previous Council. He was a friend. The
23 greatest thing that I remember, he could-- on a bad
24 day, he would brighten it somehow with that smile.
25 He just managed to always be smiling, even if he

1
2 didn't feel well. So, he's an inspiration and
3 certainly we'll miss him terribly in both areas, the
4 City Council obviously, and DVS. Thank you. You can
5 go ahead. I'm sorry.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much.
7 Good morning, Chair Holden, Committee Members,
8 Veteran and Armed Forces members in attendance, their
9 loved ones and advocates. My name is James Hendon. I
10 serve as Commissioner of the New York City DEPARTMENT
11 of Veteran Services. I'm joined today by my
12 colleagues Jason Loughran, the Senior Advisor for
13 Intergovernmental Affairs, and Lamarr Wheeler,
14 Director of our Housing Support Services Team. Thank
15 you for providing us with the opportunity to discuss
16 DVS' Preliminary Budget and what we've done, are
17 doing, and will do in support of New York City's
18 veteran community. Following my testimony, we
19 welcome any questions that committee members may
20 have. First, to talk about the past. The New York
21 City Department of Veteran Services has undergone a
22 significant evolution since it was first established
23 as an agency on April 8th, 2016. In the ensuing
24 years we have transitioned from being a referral
25 entity to one whose emphasis is on providing direct

1 services. This transformation is marked by a series
2 of internal shifts aimed at better serving New York
3 City's 200,000+ US military service members past and
4 present and their loved ones. We chose to focus on
5 services, because we recognize that there's certain
6 functions specific to helping veteran and military
7 families that DVS is uniquely positioned to offer
8 through our capacity as an organ of city government.
9 Examples include but are not limited to combatting
10 veteran housing insecurity, helping veterans file VA
11 claims, and ensuring that when a veteran who served
12 honorably passes away, they receive the appropriate
13 honor and burial benefits regardless of personal
14 wealth. It was key to us to offer immediate and
15 tangible assistance in areas critical to the
16 wellbeing of our constituents. DVS' service offerings
17 evolved significantly over time. Initially, efforts
18 such as the Core4 Whole Health model highlighted the
19 agency's board approach to providing veteran support,
20 promoting veteran wellbeing directly and indirectly
21 through lenses of culture, connection, community and
22 clinical care. Separate from our staff who fought
23 veteran housing insecurity which operated in its own
24 silo, a majority of our community coordinators
25

1 effectively serve as referral specialists. A
2 coordinators main strengthen when engaging a veteran
3 was identifying their needs, then referring them to
4 other entities that could be of assistance known
5 today's a care coordination. Over time, DVS refined
6 its approach to explicitly embrace areas that the
7 agency is mandated to address per Chapter 75 of the
8 City of New York's Charter. Its six Charter mandated
9 areas are healthcare, housing, benefits, culture,
10 education, and employment. This refocusing allowed
11 DVS to align its resources and efforts more closely
12 with the needs of the veteran community, ensuring
13 that vital services were provided in the most in-
14 demand areas. For instance, through this new
15 approach, community coordinators evolved from simply
16 referring veterans to partners, to also being
17 accredited by the New York State Department of
18 Veterans Services to help veterans file VA claims.
19 Moreover, the Housing support Services team
20 transitioned from operating in a silo to working more
21 synergistically with other arteries of DVS. When a
22 veteran had housing needs but simultaneously had
23 emergency, healthcare, benefits, education needs,
24 etcetera, there was more cross-pollination of support
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1 from others in the agency working in tandem with the
2 Housing Coordinator who was the veteran's first point
3 of contact. We still work with external partners, to
4 be clear. There are more than 100 active service
5 providers on our digital referral and services
6 platform Vet Connect NYC which you can visit online
7 at nyc.gov/vetconnect. Nevertheless, the quality and
8 breadth of support to clients due to our
9 collaborative service first model has increased on
10 our watch. That being said, unforeseen challenges
11 like COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented barriers
12 to our evolution. COVID-era budget cuts, a hiring
13 freeze, macroeconomic fissures, stress to capacity,
14 external systems, internal health struggles akin to
15 those faced by all at the time, and rising food
16 insecurity are just some of the challenges that we
17 faced. During the height of the pandemic,
18 approximately 25 DVS employees comprised the on-hand
19 staff. For perspective, our authorized strength just
20 prior to the pandemic in March of 2020 was 49 people.
21 The current authorized strength of the agency is 38.
22 When DVS began navigating COVID, we were on an
23 organic growth trajectory as a new agency that had
24 not yet turned four years old. Still, DVS
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1 persevered, adapting its operations to continue
2 serving veterans effectively. Despite these
3 obstacles presented by the pandemic, DVS maintained
4 its commitment to the veteran community demonstrating
5 resilience and flexibility in its service delivery
6 models. Moreover, COVID-19 and economic hardships
7 subsequently faced by the City taught us as a young
8 agency what was essential, what was not, and how to
9 forge a blueprint in a resource-constrained
10 environment still generates maximum impact. An
11 operational milestone was the dramatic expansion of
12 the agency's ability to identify veterans. From
13 having contact information for approximately 5,000
14 veterans in 2019, DVS expanded its capabilities to
15 include information for now more than 100,000
16 veterans today. Data-sharing agreements with other
17 government entities, national advocacy to the US
18 Department of Defense, increased participation in
19 veteran-adjacent activities, and media amplification
20 through various platforms, print, broadcast, internet
21 and otherwise informed this rise. The expansion of
22 who is in the community we could identify was crucial
23 in enabling the agency to engage with a broader swath
24 of the veteran populous, thereby extending our
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1 services to a wider group. In order to actuate these
2 strategic shifts, DVS made thoughtful pivots in the
3 following areas: operations, administration,
4 contracting, personnel and community engagement.
5

6 These changes were integral to enhancing the agency's
7 capacity to deliver service effectively, ensuring
8 that all frameworks and resources were aligned with
9 the Department's mission and broader objectives.

10 Central to DVS' approach is our belief that human-to-
11 human service delivery is at the heart of this
12 agency. Technology, while important, is an enhancer,
13 not the core of how services are delivered. Physical
14 engagement fuels DVS' efforts. This is amplified by
15 digital initiatives which augment the agency's reach
16 and efficiency. Our approach underscores the
17 importance of personal interaction in meeting the
18 needs of veterans. This reflects the agency's
19 commitment to providing compassionate and responsive
20 care. As anew agency facing acute and growing needs
21 within the veteran community, DVS navigated a
22 challenging landscape characterized by scarce
23 resources. This situation required creativity and a
24 sharp focus on prioritizing essential services. The
25 experience honed DVS' understanding of what is truly

1 important in serving the veteran community, leading
2 to the development of a robust and effective delivery
3 model that addresses the most pressing needs of
4 veterans and their loved ones. Now to speak to the
5 current state of affairs, the present. Excluding the
6 headquarters component, organizationally, DVS now
7 consists of three major verticals. They are
8 administration, community services, and strategic
9 engagement. The Administration vertical of DVS
10 includes functions such as information technology,
11 human resources, payroll and timekeeping, compliance,
12 fiscal operations, and equal opportunity. DVS admin
13 has perennially facilitated the internal functions
14 needed to sustain us as an agency. Within DVS our
15 community services vertical plays a crucial role in
16 focusing on three of our six charter-mandated areas,
17 housing, benefits, and healthcare. In support of
18 those charter-mandated areas, community services
19 executes four tasks. Those tasks are housing support
20 services, VA claims, burial services, and care
21 coordination. Thirdly, our strategic engagement arm
22 focuses on the charter-mandated areas of education,
23 employment and culture. Strategic engagement
24 oversees education, employment and culture because
25

1 relative to other aspects of the Charter, we rely
2 deeply on partners when it comes to working with
3 schools for education, employers for employment, and
4 nonprofit organizations for culture, respectively.

5 DVS' strategic engagement vertical is divided into
6 four subunits: outreach, events, partnerships, and
7 communication. While there's sometimes overlap
8 between the endeavors of the three verticals,
9 community services, administration, strategic
10 engagement, the groups work together effortlessly to
11 execute our agency's assignment of moving the bell
12 curve that is New York City's veteran community to
13 the right. Across these verticals DVS has
14 demonstrated a strong commitment to serving New York
15 City's veteran community through comprehensive
16 services, strategic partnerships, and targeted
17 outreach and engagement. The agency's efforts from
18 the beginning of the Adams Administration to the
19 present have contributed significantly to improving
20 the lives of veterans and their families,
21 highlighting DVS' role as an essential resource for
22 veterans in the City of New York. Some, not all,
23 accomplishments include in healthcare, the launch of
24 Get Covered NYC Vet, an effort conducted in
25

1 partnership for the Mayor's public engagement unit
2 aimed at helping veteran and military families access
3 VA healthcare and/or the New York state of health
4 where applicable. Data sharing agreements with the
5 Veterans Health Administration: with 100,000 active
6 records, 100,000+, DVS contact information for more
7 veterans living in the City of New York than the VA
8 who maintains approximately 38,000+ active records.
9 We now share our data with them to facilitate VA
10 outreach to eligible VA healthcare clients who are
11 currently untethered. Crisis intercept mapping and
12 the Veterans Mental Health Coalition: Crisis
13 intercept mapping and the Veterans Mental Health
14 Coalition are communities of practice for responders
15 to mental health incidents involving New York City
16 veterans. Crisis intercept mapping is hyperlocal
17 with emphasis on first responders. The Veterans
18 Mental Health Coalition is citywide with an emphases
19 on enduring stakeholders. For housing, the Empire
20 State Supportive Housing Initiative: DVS-- also known
21 as ESSHI. DVS has leveraged ESSHI to facilitate the
22 forthcoming erection of 250+ units of new state
23 subsidized veteran supportive housing in the City of
24 New York. Project-based Veterans Affairs Supportive
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2 Housing known as VASH: working with our partners at
3 the VA, the New York City Housing Authority and the
4 New York City Department for Housing, Preservation
5 and Development, DVS has laid the foundation to erect
6 here in New York City the first project-based VASH
7 collaborative case management units. The
8 collaborative case management, formerly known as VASH
9 Continuum, is a form of VASH specific to veterans who
10 are not eligible for VA healthcare. DVS, we as an
11 agency, provide case management to these veterans.
12 Also together, we've laid the foundation to erect the
13 first traditional project-based VASH units built in
14 New York City since 2016. Mitchell-Lama
15 transparency: DVS advocated for the passage of state
16 legislation signed into law last year which publicly
17 conveys how many New Yorkers utilizing Mitchell-
18 Lama's veteran's preference are on the wait list for
19 each Mitchell development. Through this law,
20 veterans have a clear picture of the path available
21 to them when seeking affordable housing through
22 Mitchell-Lama. For benefits, pop-up veteran resource
23 centers: on an advertised one-day-only basis, DVS
24 positioned our veteran benefits advisors in community
25 locals such as district offices for City Council

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2 Members, New York City Health + Hospitals medical
3 facilities, borough-level District Attorney's
4 offices, and NYPD Police Academy veteran resource
5 fairs, etcetera. Indigent burials: DVS utilizes the
6 state's program for reimbursing indigent veteran
7 burials to an extent broader than that of any other
8 municipality in New York. We've cultivated pathways
9 for the state's reimbursement of an indigent
10 veteran's burial to flow through either a veteran's
11 service organization or the City of New York,
12 diversified available funding streams should one run
13 out. We've also set aside internal funds
14 specifically in support of the indigent burial--
15 indigent veteran burial program. Claims support in
16 partnership with Vet Connect service providers: DVS
17 is amplifying the number of VA claims specialists in
18 New York City by helping Vet Connect service
19 providers who desire to help veterans file VA claims,
20 obtain accreditation from the State of New York to
21 process said claims if they're not currently
22 accredited. We provide quality assurance and quality
23 control to serve as provider's designated claims rep,
24 and then if needed, refer claims to a service
25 provider through Vet Connect NYC. For education,

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2 military family advocate program: DVS partners with
3 NYC Public Schools to pilot an effort, currently in
4 year one, whereby the desired end-state is that all
5 DOE schools will have a designated staff or faculty
6 member who is the point of contact for military and
7 veteran family needs. The current pilot here for
8 2023-2024 school year involves 77 schools on Staten
9 Island. Student Veteran for Life: DVS has designed
10 and expanded a Student Veterans for Life-- a Student
11 Veteran of American inspired initiative currently
12 embraced by Fordham University, Manhattan College,
13 and John Jay College of Criminal Justice whereby high
14 school students who enlist in the US Armed Forces in
15 the greater New York City region are assured pre-
16 admission to each school's graduate program upon
17 completing their initial military commitment. JROTC
18 expansion: DVS is working with New York City Public
19 Schools to increase the number of JROTC programs in
20 New York City for the first time in a material way in
21 decades. The number of JROTC program sin DOE has
22 increased from 19 to 25 programs since 2022 as a
23 result of this partnership. More programs are on
24 track to be added. Employment, DOD Skill Bridge:
25 DVS has increased the number of New York City-based

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2 work experience training opportunities available to
3 transitioning service members who take advantage of
4 DOD Skill Bridge. Skill Bridget is a federally
5 subsidized work experience training program that is
6 available to transitioning service members during
7 their last 180 days of military service. Boss [sic]
8 Up Veterans Small Business Program: In 2023, DVS
9 executed in partnership with the NYC Department of
10 Small Business Services and the Ron and Kerry Moelis
11 Foundation, the City of New York's first ever small
12 business competition exclusively for veteran
13 entrepreneurs. Civil service veteran expansions:
14 Working in partnership with the New York City
15 Department of Citywide Administrative Services, DCAS,
16 DVS helped to expand New York City's veteran and
17 disabled veteran credit to include veterans who
18 served during both peace time and times of conflict.
19 Also, DVS and DCAS partnered to extend a one-time
20 Civil Service Exam fee waiver to veteran and military
21 spouses. Culture, community engagement sessions:
22 DVS established a recurring public form for veteran
23 community leaders, particular VSOs to engage DVS
24 leadership directly and vice versa on issues
25 impacting New York City's veteran and military

1 families. Honoring our Vietnam War veterans: DVS
2 Consistently recognizes New York City's next greatest
3 generation of veterans after our World War II and
4 Korean War veterans through more robust support of
5 Vietnam Veterans Day and Agent Orange Remembrance Day
6 activities. Also, we publicly recognized the 36 New
7 York City veterans who are still missing in action in
8 Vietnam. Further, working with the Vietnam Veterans
9 Memorial Fund and other local Vietnam Veterans of
10 America Chapters, we temporarily erected a replica of
11 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Flushing Meadows
12 Park last autumn, the wall that heals. Citywide
13 liaisons with legacy veteran service organizations or
14 VSOs: DVS collaborated with the state-level
15 leadership of the American Legion and Veterans of
16 Foreign Wars to designate one American Legion Liaison
17 and one VFW liaison to the New York City Department
18 of veteran services. This action expedites synergy
19 and communication between DVS and a large number of
20 our local legacy VSOs. A meta [sic] development
21 during this Administration which informs all of our
22 charter-mandated areas: After years of advocacy
23 individually and in partnership with the National
24 Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs,
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1
2 DVS was a key leader in this effort. Starting in
3 October of 2022, our agency began receiving contact
4 information directly from the Defense Department for
5 transitioning service members who indicated on their
6 DD214s that they intend to settle down in New York
7 City. This was a watershed moment when it comes to
8 identifying and maintaining positive knowledge about
9 our incoming veterans and their families. Now, to
10 the days ahead, the future. As we look to the
11 future, DVS is dedicated to a multifaceted approach
12 to better serving our constituents. Our vision
13 encompasses three key priorities, each aimed at
14 enhancing our support for veterans and their loved
15 ones. Priority one, identifying untethered veterans.
16 Our first priority is to intensify our efforts to
17 identify untethered veterans. These are veterans who
18 for various reasons may not be fully connected to the
19 services and benefits that they've rightfully earned.
20 For greater context, according to the VA's FY22 Gross
21 Domestic Expenditure Report, while 33.1 percent of
22 eligible veterans nationwide take advantage of VA
23 benefits, that proportion falls to 29.6 percent in
24 New York State, and 24.2 percent in New York City.
25 To better identify our brothers and sisters who are

1 untethered, we are taking a multipronged approach
2 which includes but is not limited to introduction of
3 legislative measures. We support and advocate for
4 measures like Intro 1237 recently passed by the
5 Council. Intro 1237 will organically improve data-
6 sharing mechanisms between city agencies and DVS.
7 This legislation significantly enhances our ability
8 to identify veterans who are not yet connected to our
9 services and asks on almost all City of New York
10 client-facing forms to paraphrase, "Have you ever
11 served in the US Armed Forces. If so, then would you
12 like to be connected to DVS?" Sharing information
13 with elected officials: Informing New York City's
14 elected officials at the City, State, and Federal
15 levels of who the veterans are and their districts
16 that we're aware of increases the number of
17 stakeholders who will engage our constituents in a
18 targeted, hyperlocal way. Often the decision by a
19 veteran or military family to identify themselves and
20 come to the light is dictated by how many times
21 they've been engaged. Currently, data-sharing
22 agreements that DVS has executed with the New York
23 City Council, New York State Assembly, New York State
24 Senate, and forthcoming New York City's Congressional
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2 Delegation will enable us together to expedite this
3 process. Utilizing military separation paperwork of
4 DD214s: we have New York City's transitioning
5 service members DD214s. We know who many of them are
6 as of 2022. Working with partners, we hope to
7 identify the optimal way or ways to engage this
8 cohort of new veterans such that we establish a
9 rapport and long-term trust. It is our goal for this
10 bond to be mutually beneficial to transitioning
11 service members and the broader veteran community.
12 Amplifying DVS messaging: to reach more veterans we
13 aim to enhance our community strategies. This
14 includes working closely with partners to smartly
15 intensify our messaging through various platforms,
16 ensuring that every New York City veteran, including
17 those we do not currently know is aware of how to
18 access our agency and our partners. Priority two,
19 integrating untethered veterans: After identifying
20 untethered veterans, our first priority, our second
21 priority is to integrate those veterans and their
22 families into the broader ecosystem of DVS and DVS-
23 affiliated services. Those strategies include
24 providing care coordination services to transitioning
25 service members before their arrival. Currently, DVS

1 received DD214 data from the Department of Defense
2 during the week when a service member's DD214 was
3 processed at the Pentagon. In coming months, we will
4 also begin receiving transition assistance program
5 data. We receive contact information for service
6 members who are still on active-duty status, but who
7 will have informed their leaders through a form known
8 as a DD2648 that they intend to leave the military
9 within the next 12 months and transition to New York
10 City. Engaging service members before their
11 departure from active-duty allows us to help ensure a
12 smooth transition to civilian life. Connecting
13 veterans to local veteran service organizations: We
14 aim to do our part to help increase the utilization
15 of existing VSOs through various methods, some of
16 which include asking veterans for their consent to be
17 connected to local VSOs upon their arrival in New
18 York City, promoting VSO activities through the New
19 York City Veteran Community Calendar run by our
20 friends at the Bob Woodrow Foundation, our
21 Veterans.nyc, and increasing our coordination with
22 VSO leaders throughout DVS' community engagement
23 meetings and our citywide VFW and American Legion
24 Liaisons. Fortifying our Vet Connect service
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1 provider network: it is important to prepare our Vet
2 Connect service providers to function in a way that
3 ensures the cumulative delivery of services to DVS
4 clients is always able to meet demand. In other
5 words, if for instance, DVS has a surge of clients
6 who engage our agency about essential services like
7 those involving housing insecurity, indigent veteran
8 burials, and/or VA claims, we will refer said
9 veterans to pre-determined, pre-groomed partner
10 entities through Vet Connect NYC. We're in the
11 initial stages of grooming partners specific to
12 housing insecurity and VA claim support at this time.
13 Priority three, increased emphasis on housing and
14 claims: Finally, our third priority is to increase
15 our emphasis on housing and claim assistance for
16 veterans, expanding housing support, recognizing the
17 importance of stable housing for veterans. We're
18 committed to working with stakeholders both internal
19 and external to leverage existing resources so as to
20 increase our footprint in aiding veteran and military
21 families and the transition from insecure to secure
22 housing. Enhancing claim support: empowering
23 veterans with the support they need to navigate VA
24 claims process is vital. We aim to improve our
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2 capacity to assist veterans in filing claims,
3 ensuring that they receive the benefits they're
4 entitled to in a timely manner. By focusing on these
5 priorities, the Department of Veterans Services is
6 committed to not just meeting the immediate needs of
7 our veterans, but ensuring they are fully integrated
8 into a supportive and understanding community. Our
9 goal is to ensure that every veteran military family
10 member in New York City has access to the services,
11 support and community they deserve. Concluding:
12 Beyond our thoughts on the Agency's past, present and
13 future, there are four common themes that I would
14 like to share which undergird many of our decisions
15 and actions. They are DVS organization: the way
16 that DVS is organized leans first on our strategy for
17 engaging and serving the veteran community. Second,
18 on the need for their to be redundancy in certain
19 administrative roles in order for us to function as
20 an agency. And third, on the desire to add more
21 client-serving staff to our framework as demand from
22 veteran and military families offerings increases.
23 The federal unfunded mandate: a large portion of our
24 work involves filling a federal unfunded mandated
25 generated by the VA in its decision to limit

1 healthcare eligibility drastically compared to the
2 more permissive guidelines that existed for veterans
3 who enlisted in the military before September 1980.
4 Second and third order effects from this decision are
5 felt today at the local level. Also, this decision
6 is largely subsidized, directly, indirectly, and
7 otherwise by our nonprofit partners and at DVS.
8 Complex challenges: many of the challenge the New
9 York City veteran community faces, structural, policy
10 demographic, etcetera are more complicated than they
11 appear on the surface. They often require analysis
12 that views the problem in-depth over a period of
13 years, not just a one or two-year snapshot, along
14 with a solution that may take years to reach
15 fruition, i.e., building new supportive housing,
16 federal legislative fixes, attracting more
17 transitioning service members to New York City,
18 etcetera. Veteran identification: this agency will
19 remain committed to identifying untethered veteran
20 and military families, providing them with earned
21 benefits and services as we do with all DVS clients,
22 and connecting them to the broader New York City
23 veteran ecosystem. We pray that this testimony has
24 given you a firm understanding of where our agency
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1
2 came from, where we currently are, and where we
3 intend to be. We also hope that you understand how we
4 think and some of the broader themes that we wrestle
5 with. We welcome continued collaboration as we work
6 tighter to connect, mobilize, and empower New York
7 City's veteran and military families. I urge you all
8 to please reach out to me or our Senior Advisor for
9 Intergovernmental Affairs, Jason Loughran, with any
10 follow-up questions or thoughts. Please view us as a
11 tool to assist as you navigate legislative ideas and
12 a perspective enabler of your historic and future
13 success. Your success as a committee is beneficial
14 for all veterans. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you,
16 Commissioner for that. Let's talk about the size of
17 your agency for a second. DVS Fiscal 2025
18 Preliminary Budget includes 37 fulltime positions.
19 As of January 2024, 36 of those positions were
20 actually filled, leaving one vacant. It was
21 announced on February 21st, 2024 that the Mayor is
22 cancelling the PEG for the Executive Plan and the
23 Administration is moving from a near-full hiring
24 freeze to a two-for-one model, and easing other than
25 personnel spending, OTPS, freeze restrictions. Does

1
2 the agency have adequate headcount to effectively run
3 all the programs and initiatives, and if not, how
4 many additional positions does DVS require? Now, the
5 truth, I need the truth here, because you're under
6 oath. What do we really need? Because 36 is not
7 going to do it, ever. It's never going to do it, and
8 we're just kidding ourselves. What do you really
9 need in the way of personnel?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to update
11 one piece-- and thank you for the question, Mr.
12 Chair. I want to update one piece of that, the
13 numbers. As of now, the headcount is 38. There are
14 two of 38 who are on protected leave, just as of now.
15 That's the correct number as of January, but as of
16 now it's 38 the headcount. Two are on protective
17 leave, and there's one vacancy in the agency. For
18 the US, the priorities as far as-- the key things
19 when you look at us, the first-- and it was kind of--
20 what I mentioned in the testimony, first goal for us
21 is have the framework right. Like, how are we going
22 to be-- how are we going to array ourselves to go
23 attack these problems, this issues with our veterans.
24 That's the first thing. The next thing is, we have
25 to have certain redundancy administratively just to

1
2 survive as an agency. In other words, there was a
3 time when we had only one person on IT. That's not
4 sustainable. We need at least another person. There
5 was a time we only had one person doing physical
6 operations. That's not sustainable. There was a
7 time where we only had one person doing HR. You need
8 at least some redundancy or else everything come
9 crashing down. So number two, because it's how we
10 breathe, is making sure the administrative house is
11 in a good place. Number three, it's fleshing out the
12 team and adding client-facing staff so that once
13 you've got the framework there, you can add the
14 flesh. We can continue to make touches with people.
15 priorities for us, top of the ticket is housing, to
16 get a place where we have an ample amount of housing
17 coordinators so that we can continue to push our
18 numbers down, which we can talk about a little later,
19 and the other piece is claims, to have enough claims
20 representation to adequately provide support to our
21 veterans who need it, and to at a minimum be able to
22 cover down on each of the five boroughs as far as
23 having somebody who's dedicated for claims for at
24 least those five boroughs, and having at least enough
25 folks on the housing side to continue to push to a

1
2 place where functional zero for veteran homeless is
3 400. We'd like to try to get to that number. And
4 I'm sorry, I got to defer to Lamarr as far as about
5 how many people typically housed per year by our
6 housing coordinator. Lamarr, if you can add to that.

7 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Yes, sir.
8 Typically, 100, 120 is typically how many we house
9 annually.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: but as far as one
11 coordinator, what one coordinator typically do?

12 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Forty.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And so when you
14 look at the-- even the point in time account numbers,
15 and the most recent point in time count is 567 as of
16 January 2023 is a snapshot. It's like wart coming in
17 water coming out as far as those who are coming in
18 who are housing insecure and then those who are
19 working the triage. And so we're trying to with this
20 constant water in/water out get to a place where
21 there's less water where we can get to stay
22 underneath 400. So top of the ticket is to have
23 enough coordinators to be able to keep us at lower
24 than 400, and have enough claims representation to be

1
2 able to cover down at least at a rate of one claim
3 per borough at least.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So what are we
5 talking about in total staff that you could function
6 the way you should function?

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I--

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] 80? 90?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We'll always be
10 grateful for more resources--

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Okay, I
12 know, but I need--

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] But
14 it's--

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Let's
16 talk about our veterans, though. How many people in
17 your agency could help more-- I mean, obviously if
18 you have 37, 38 whatever positions, that's not enough
19 to get to everyone, not even nearly enough. So I
20 would say just for the sake of argument, if we
21 doubled DVS in size in personnel, because I want
22 something to shoot for here. I want to bring it to
23 the Mayor that, Mr. Mayor, we can help so many more
24 veterans if we had a much larger DVS, because we're
25 not getting-- our veterans are not getting the

1
2 services they've actually earned. So, if we could
3 reach out to more veterans and get them actual the
4 funding or the healthcare that they deserve, that
5 would help New York City tremendously. So it's not a
6 big investment. That's what I'm saying to the Mayor.
7 I'd like you to say what's a good target. And I
8 know, I don't want to get anybody in trouble, but if
9 you had to come up with a number in the future, what
10 would you like to see the size of our agency. Say
11 double.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to-- before
13 answering, I just have to say for us, to be clear,
14 we're in a place where it's having more client-
15 serving staff, that's the piece of it. In other
16 words, we have the framework.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: it's having more
19 client-serving staff. And you know, it's--I could
20 say looking at prior to the pandemic, as I mentioned
21 in testimony, we're at 49 was our strength. We're at
22 38 now. And so for me, just to even get back to
23 where we were before pandemic would be something that
24 we'd be grateful for.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, okay.

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: but it's-- but to
3 be clear, the need on claims-- you've got-- we
4 estimate there to be 23,821 veterans in this city who
5 if they applied for a VA claim would receive
6 compensation of some sort. That's just service-
7 connected disability, not even other aspects of VA
8 claims. So it's 23,821 veterans who-- this is the
9 number to get us from the current proportion which is
10 16.5 percent of veterans has a VA claim in New York
11 City to the national number which 27.8. So, to get
12 to what the national numbers are, you're talking
13 about 23,821, and then on the housing piece, for us,
14 it's getting to a place with this constant flow of
15 veterans coming in and out that we can steady it and
16 be at less than 400, so the number of veterans we
17 need to continue to get there on the housing side.
18 So, just to answer-- to give some sort of framework
19 for it, but yeah.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Under the
21 hiring freeze, were any positions at DVS exempt and
22 why?

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Right now for the--
24 just to speak to the present hiring freeze. There
25 are three exceptions to that two-for-one. In other

1
2 words, and exception is made if it's a revenue-
3 generating position. An exception is made if it is a
4 public safety position, and exception is made if it
5 is a public health position. And so for us, when we
6 talk about claims and we talk about housing, you
7 know, our argument is that those fit within the realm
8 of public health. And so in that line when I speak
9 saying hey we would like to increase our
10 representation, number of folks we have coordinators
11 for claims, coordinators for housing, that you know,
12 we believe that that's something that would be exempt
13 from the guidelines because it touches veteran
14 housing insecurity. You can draw the line to health.
15 VA claims, you can draw the direct line to VA
16 healthcare as well. So that's kind of where we look
17 at this, Mr. Chair.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, the priority
19 positions at DVS, is that the revenue-generating
20 personnel?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's--

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Is that
23 the priority?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: The priority, we
25 look at it-- we look at those as public health when

1
2 it comes to claims and housing, and that is the
3 priority with housing being the top, then claims.
4 That's how we look at it. For revenue, the thing
5 with revenue is our work, we help veterans obtain
6 federal benefits. So when it comes to revenue its
7 2022 Fiscal Year it was \$1.9 billion in federal
8 funding that came to the City of New York courtesy of
9 veterans receiving benefit support, etcetera. So,
10 when you look at the work that we do with, you know,
11 on housing side, on the claims side, on the burial
12 side there's federal funding attached to that. So
13 when we say the revenue, it's really the context of
14 the economic footprint of what our veterans bring.
15 When the City looks at revenue, they're thinking of
16 it in terms of internally more of, you know, if a
17 fine is administered by Department of Buildings,
18 that's revenue or things like that or fees. And so
19 for us, it's why we don't look at these as revenue
20 positions. We look at these more so on the public
21 health side, Mr. Chair.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, good. I
23 thought you were going to-- you were looking for
24 information. So what are some of the main challenges
25 DVS is facing specifically in hiring new candidates?

1
2 What are some of the challenges? Training, finding
3 the right candidates? Does-- what are you facing now
4 in the current budget situation?

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think the biggest
6 challenge is, you know, getting the approval to be
7 able to make the hires, because we still have to go
8 through the same traps. All the agencies do in this
9 landscape, to get that green light to bring that
10 person on, to have that discussion to make sure that
11 this is counted as public health as an example. So
12 it's that internal piece of it. Working internal
13 with leverage and resources we have to get more done.
14 So I think it's-- the hurdle isn't the need as far as
15 we are certain that there are talented individuals
16 out who would like to serve in government who may
17 already be in government and we think would be value
18 added to the team, especially in our areas of need in
19 claims and housing. It's just internally going
20 through what we have to go through to be able to get
21 those green lights to hire.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Let's talk about
23 mental health screenings. The number of mental
24 health screenings completed in Fiscal 2022 was 845
25 which declined in Fiscal 2023 to 626. In the first

1
2 four months of Fiscal Year 2024, there were 137
3 mental health screenings, another decline of 73.3
4 percent when compared to the same period of the last
5 fiscal year. So, DVS has a target of 730 screenings
6 in Fiscal Year 2024. Why is the number of mental
7 health screenings been declining, Commissioner?

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, we
9 decided to not make it a mandatory set of questions
10 we asked when a veteran approaches us for assistance.
11 So in the last Administration during the Vets Thrive
12 days, it was if you came to DVS we would give you--
13 administer the GAT7 [sic], the PHQ9. These are
14 screenings for anxiety, for depression, and this was
15 my call. I personally went through receiving claim
16 support from DVS, and I was asked right away these
17 questions, and I thought to myself, goodness, I don't
18 want to be infantilized. I don't want people to
19 treat me like a victim. I'm just coming to get claim
20 support, and so that really fueled the decision
21 instead of making a mandatory question where anyone
22 comes to us we ask them these things. It is
23 something that's optional. We've worked to optimize
24 the language since PMMR where our mental health lead,
25 you know, Doctor Melo [sp?] and our Press Secretary,

1
2 Chuck Rivera [sp?] [inaudible] okay, what's the way
3 we can ask this where it's more welcoming if someone
4 does want to take that screener. At the same time,
5 we do not see ourselves going back to a situation
6 where someone comes to us about one thing, and we're
7 automatically asking them questions presuming they
8 may have anxiety or depression.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But so-- to increase
10 the number of screenings, the plan you just mentioned
11 is to ask a number of question, and the go-around
12 'til you get to that point.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, I want to
14 clarify that. No, it's to-- it's asking the question
15 would you like to--

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Would
17 you like, but--

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] It's
19 asking it in a warmer way, but our-- at the end of
20 the day I don't know if we'll get back to a place
21 where we have such a high number, because it was
22 force-fed on anyone who came to us, and it was a
23 decision for us to not-- we just don't want people to
24 feel like right away-- you know, I'm coming to you
25 for help with my small business. You're asking me

1 these questions as if I have anxiety or depression.
2 You know, we always talk about how it's seven percent
3 of veterans will experience PTSD at some point in
4 their lives. Six percent of all Americans will
5 experience PTSD at some point in their lives. We
6 don't want our people to feel as though we're
7 treating them differently. If someone goes to
8 another agency they're not asked questions like this
9 off the bat.
10

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, again, I
12 don't know if that's the right-- I mean, you-- I'll
13 defer to you, but I would essentially think, you
14 know, first-- and again, it's old thinking possibly,
15 but that people do have post-traumatic stress.
16 People, you know, coming from the service for various
17 reasons that are hidden. So you got to pull them
18 out. So there's got to be a strategy to try to get
19 to that. And you mentioned, you know, one point
20 you're trying to do, but if the end result is less
21 screenings, I don't know if that's helpful.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, it's tough,
23 though. Just to go back to the data, it's seven
24 percent of all veterans.
25

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, I know that.
3 I know all that.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's six percent of
5 all-- and so we just-- we're-- it's-- I don't-- this
6 is me personally, Mr. Chair, and this was my decision
7 completely. I don't want people to feel like we are
8 automatically assuming that they are broken, and so
9 we'll ask questions. we're trying to, you know, make
10 that language more appealing for folks to voluntarily
11 do this, but I just don't want us to if someone comes
12 to us with questions about educational benefits, or
13 questions about something else, that we automatically
14 go right into the anxiety and depression screenings.
15 I just-- as a veteran and as someone who-- the
16 trigger was me experiencing it myself as a client of
17 DVS. I felt put-off by it, and were able to break
18 form it, because we're past-- beyond the Vets Thrive
19 days and so we decided to, Mr. Chair.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But on the flip side
21 of that, some of the veterans are not going to admit
22 that they have problems. We know-- I had a personal
23 experience with that with my dad. He never would
24 admit anything, but he was totally affected by the
25 war, couldn't function, but he never sought help and

1
2 never would admit it. so, that's a prob-- this is
3 problem to pull that out, and that's why I think we
4 should go further into finding what are the causes
5 some of the veterans are going through in life that
6 they can't overcome or that they can't really
7 function as well as probably they should have if they
8 were diagnosed. And that's why it's a tough-- I know
9 the national average, what you mentioned, is numbers
10 from-- I'm not sure those numbers are accurate,
11 because just experiences with veterans. My
12 experience with veterans have been mostly from the
13 Vietnam War, and also World War II and Korea. So,
14 those were the-- where I was around most of those
15 individuals. And speaking to veterans today, even, I
16 can see that they're affected even though they tell
17 me, I'm okay, I'm okay. So that's why I'm suspect
18 with the numbers nationally and what you were
19 telling-- but again, that's my experience and we all
20 are different human beings. We all-- it affects us
21 differently, certainly combat, but it does affect--
22 if you're human, it affects everyone to a various
23 degree. Alright, let me go on to the Joseph B.
24 Dwyer--

25

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] Mr.
3 Chair, may I say something just to--

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Yeah,
5 yeah.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I feel like one of
7 the deeper goals for us to form relationships with
8 the veterans. In other words, not just us, but also
9 our partners in the veteran community where you may
10 have someone who may not want to open up on certain
11 things, but they come to you for one need at first,
12 and as time goes--

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] And
14 then you-- yeah.

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: by they feel more
16 comfortable. I feel like that's the holy grail of
17 this is they get to a place where someone is
18 comfortable enough with us where our relationship
19 exists, and when they are ready to open themselves up
20 in that way we're there, but not that we turn them
21 off.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. We've been
23 joined by Council Member Vickie Paladino. Let's talk
24 about the-- and then I'll open up some questions to
25

1
2 my colleagues. Okay. Council Member Marmorato,
3 yeah?

4 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Hi, good
5 morning. Thank you so much for coming. Thank you
6 for your service. Me and my family and my community
7 appreciate it. We truly do.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Just a couple
10 of questions. I'm sorry, I'm like a little-- so in
11 2024, the PMMR, the fourth month actual-- the number
12 for the Veterans Services is three times greater than
13 what it was for last year. What is the reason for
14 the increase?

15 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Thank you,
16 Councilwoman. I think what you're referring to is our
17 veterans served data for our PMMR, this most recently
18 published. What we attribute that increase to is
19 much of the partnership that we've been facilitating
20 with the City Council district offices is our
21 increase in social media outreach and our
22 partnerships through various events that we've held
23 like the Wall that Heals and the New York Mets
24 Transition Summit. So what we're seeing here is that
25 we're doing a better job of getting the word out

1 about who we are, and we're bringing services out to
2 the community where they are. we also want to-- this
3 kind of ties into Chair Holden's question, too, in
4 terms of the mental health screenings, and that when
5 we're getting out to people and meeting them face-to-
6 face and talking to them, removing the say robotic
7 questionnaires of, you know, answer these 10
8 questions for me, but developing a relationship with
9 them in your offices at these events. We get to the
10 point where that person who originally came to us for
11 employment actually ends up also getting a mental
12 health referral and employment referral and a
13 financial counseling referral. So one thing I want
14 to point out in that data point is that it's
15 increased by so much because it's not only that we're
16 meeting with more clients, but we're also getting to
17 a higher plethora of their needs. And so instead of
18 that one referral of, hey, I came to DVS and I want
19 employment services and we give them employment
20 services, it was that relationship building component
21 that led to two other referrals. So that means that
22 the served number is now three times for that
23 individuals rather than the one data point. I'll
24
25

1
2 refer to the Commissioner and Lamarr if they have
3 anything to add.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much.
5 I just want to add Council Member Marmorato, another
6 piece of this is we feel like things like this are
7 leading indicators of where we're going. There's
8 been a lot of work we've been doing for years now to
9 get to a place where we reach these tipping points.
10 We start to see more just touches with our veterans
11 and their families, and we pray that this is
12 something that is a positive sign for us. So there's
13 different pieces of this where it's just, you know--
14 it takes time, but we've been chopping away at the
15 tree and we pray that this is something that's a
16 portent of more access like this to come.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: And just one
18 more question. What is the City and DVS strategy to
19 improve housing opportunities for the City's veterans
20 who need assistance, especially those who are living
21 in shelters currently?

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Okay. Thank you so
23 much for that question. When we look at the veteran
24 unsheltered populations, a couple of things. The
25 larger way to look at it is not just year to year,

1 but look at it over the entire time from which this
2 has been recorded, information HUD's recorded.
3 There's been a point in time count since 2007.
4 Veterans have been accounted for by state since 2009.
5 From 2011 it was done at a more local level. And so
6 there've been really three big shifts in these
7 numbers. 2011 we had 4,677, just under 5,000 in
8 2011. Then you saw it decline to roughly 3,600 when
9 you get to 2012/2013. It hovered around the 3,600
10 mark. Then we saw another drop in 2014/2015 to
11 around 1,600. After that, from 2016 to the present
12 we've been in this steady state where it's been
13 anywhere from 688 to 482 homeless veterans in the
14 City. So it's been this constant drop. We're trying
15 to not be in that band, but to be in a lower band of
16 frankly 200 to 400, because 400 is functional zero.
17 When we look at our population right now who is
18 unsheltered, a couple of caveats. One thing, and
19 Lamarr can attest to this. Approximately one out of
20 every four veterans who are in the shelter system are
21 not originally from New York City. In other words,
22 when we ask them where were you 12 months prior to
23 entering housing insecurity, it's not New York City.
24 And so, you know, we were talking about things about
25

1 right to shelter and whatnot and how it affects us
2 long before the migrant crisis, and so that's one
3 piece. Another piece, not reflected in the current
4 federal numbers we may see ahead, we now work with
5 the Department of Homeless Services to run all adults
6 who are in the shelter system through a platform the
7 VA has called Squares, where VA Squares allows you to
8 say of all these people in shelter, here are the ones
9 who are veterans, here's the ones who are not. Based
10 on that, we're seeing that for everyone who tells a
11 person that they are veteran, one does not. And so
12 the numbers are just us trying to get handle on this
13 and recognizing that the most recent point in time
14 count, that roughly a quarter of that we estimate not
15 from New York, and that it's only half of what we
16 think the actual population is. And so with those
17 things in mind, the other broader aspect of this,
18 we're in a place where a lot of the people who are in
19 the system, not all but many, need supportive housing
20 where there are substance abuse issues, there are
21 mental health issues. Not for all, but for a decent
22 number. Yet the supportive housing stock in the City
23 has little churn. So if you're a veteran and you're
24 going for veteran supportive housing from one of our
25

1 service-- SSVF, Supportive Services Veteran Family
2 providers, you go you'll see they've got less than
3 five percent who are leaving each year. And so
4 there's a need to build more units. And so one
5 aspect of this is-- this is why it was important we
6 said we've been working with the state and with
7 developers who are applying to have more units in the
8 pipeline. It looks like we'll have more than 250
9 units to be erected or they're currently in
10 construction, which we'll see come online in the
11 coming years to try to attack this because you have
12 more of the 567 who say look, let me go in supportive
13 housing. That's one piece of it. Another piece of
14 it is the-- it's all a chain, Council Member
15 Marmorato. It's a chain between emergency housing to
16 supportive housing to affordable housing to home
17 ownership. We need to rebrand how we talk about
18 supportive housing, because you have veterans who'll
19 say look, I don't want to go in supportive housing,
20 even though it may be something they need. They
21 don't want to go into it because they fear that
22 they're going to go there and that's it. And we have
23 to make it clear, no, look, there's a pathway here.
24 Don't call it supportive housing. Call it step one
25

1 housing. So we're looking to rebrand it so that more
2 veterans say look, I'm fine with going to step one
3 housing, because I recognize that step two is
4 affordable, and step three is ownership. For that,
5 we need to step in the gap on the affordable housing
6 side, and it's important to us to have as much
7 expertise as possible in-house in our agency to help
8 veterans connect the dots with what options are
9 available to them within affordable housing.
10 Everything from the Mitchell-Lama Veterans preference
11 to opportunities with HFA, the State's, you know,
12 affordable housing opportunities to navigating
13 Housing Connect here at the City and other things.
14 And so it's important for us to get our house in
15 order so that we can fortify this link, and also
16 ownership so that when someone says, look, I can see
17 a pathway. I'm not just going to stay in emergency
18 housing. I see how I can go to step one housing, and
19 then step two and then step three.

21 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Commissioner, I
22 just want to add on that, also our efforts down in
23 D.C., there was just a hearing last week on the bill
24 that we've been advocating for called the Fair Access
25 to Co-ops for Veterans Act. So right now, the VA

1
2 home loan is not eligible to be utilized for co-ops,
3 and as you all know, co-ops make a significant number
4 of our housing supply in the City. so we're working
5 diligently to push that forward and this is the first
6 time that it has been brought up to a hearing which
7 we, the VA, has said that they support with
8 amendments. S, we're very happy and proud of the
9 work we've done to get it this far, and we're hoping
10 that it passes this legislative session.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Great. Thank
12 you so much.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: There are many
14 things-- if I could add. There are many things we're
15 doing behind the scenes to try to attack these
16 issues, and it's-- you know, pies in the oven haven't
17 come out to bake yet, but we are working-- there's
18 some multiple angles. And to go back to your
19 question, Chair, we need more housing coordinators.
20 We need more claims coordinators. As far as the
21 number, we will take whatever is available. Like
22 beggars can't be choosers. That's why I don't want
23 to be caught in saying give me double, give me
24 triple, but we-- whatever we receive, we will use
25 because the need is great.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, and just
3 going back to Jason's comments, we certainly need
4 affordable housing, which you know, in talking to some
5 of the providers of supportive housing. They say we
6 have vacancies in supportive housing. We just don't--
7 - to get them to transition into affordable housing
8 has been the challenge here. And so, year to your
9 point about certainly the co-ops, that's a very, very
10 important aspect, because so many veterans are just
11 like lingering in supportive housing. When they --
12 you know, they should be unaffordable at this point,
13 and that's a problem with the providers are telling
14 me. So we need to have a very, very good plan. And
15 even talking to developers, and I-- you know, if they
16 want to build in my community, I say well you got to
17 give a preference to veterans somehow and let's get
18 that. So, you know, in working out deals it's very,
19 very important. Most people would love, again, you
20 know, a beautiful apartment anywhere in the city if
21 they-- certainly affordability is a problem for
22 veterans who were making next to nothing when they
23 were in the service. Are we kind of-- we owe them
24 any priority we can give them in New York City. Let's

1
2 work on that. I appreciate the effort. Okay, Council
3 Member Ariola has a question.

4 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Thank you, Chair.
5 Thank you commissioner. Thank you all for coming. In
6 May of 2022, Introduction 377 of 22 sponsored by
7 Council Member Borelli was introduced to grant a real
8 property tax exemption to Cold War veterans who
9 served on active duty in the United States Armed
10 forces between September 2nd, 1945 and December 26th,
11 1991, and were honorably discharged. This is
12 exemption would apply to the veterans' primary
13 resident and the exemption would be for 15 percent of
14 the assessed value of the residential property capped
15 at \$39,000 which would remain in effect for 10 years.
16 Additionally, Cold War veterans who are disabled due
17 to their service would be eligible for an additional
18 exemption of up to \$130,000. So my questions are as
19 follows: Is the Administration-- what is the
20 Administration's position on this property tax
21 exemption to Cold War veterans? Have other
22 municipalities successfully implemented one? What is
23 the estimated impact fiscally on the City's budget if
24 the property tax exemptions were extended to include
25 the Cold War veterans? And should Council Member,

1
2 now Minority Leader Borelli's bill be reintroduced
3 and passed, how does this city plan to implement and
4 manage it?

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Council Member

6 Ariola, thank you so much for the question. Couple
7 things. One is I have to separate me as a veteran
8 from me as Commissioner on this one, because as a
9 veteran I'm absolutely in favor of this. I think it's
10 important for our cohort veterans. I hate to-- we're
11 having trouble identifying people, people self-
12 identifying because they feel like oh, I'm not a
13 veteran. I didn't serve in this-- I'm not a veteran.
14 I didn't receive a purple heart. I'm not a veteran.
15 One that got me-- I'm not a veteran. I was a woman
16 who served in Vietnam. You know, so over and over
17 again things that we do that create these divisions,
18 maybe for policy reasons, budget reasons, it's
19 corrosive. And so I personally am completely in
20 favor of us having some sort of property tax
21 exemption for our veterans who served during times of
22 peace. They took the oath. They deserve the
23 benefits. That to me, as an individual. As
24 Commissioner, it's not within my authority on this
25 one because of where I'm focused charter-wise. I'm

1
2 empowered to deal with assisting and informing
3 veterans on the areas I've mentioned, and so
4 unfortunately as Commissioner, I'm limited with where
5 I can weigh in as a citizen, as a veteran. I'm
6 absolutely enthusiastic about seeing something like
7 this come back to fruition-- come to fruition. On
8 the other questions, the state of New York grants all
9 tax jurisdictions the authority to institute one,
10 two, or three different exemptions regarding
11 veterans. One is the alternative veteran's
12 exemption. Another is the eligible funds exemption,
13 and the other is a Cold War veteran's exemption. And
14 so while most-- a majority of tax jurisdictions in
15 New York State have assigned all three, New York City
16 right now has two of the three. So we do not embrace
17 that Cold War veterans exemptions. We do have
18 consent from the State to enact it. So it is
19 something that could be done. We do not at this
20 time, so as far as background. And then our own
21 estimate internally is that we believe approximately
22 15,433 peace time era veterans in New York City own
23 homes. So the number we have is 15,433 is our
24 estimate. And so that's, you know, I pray that can
25 be helpful to those who are looking at this. I wish

1
2 I could-- with an Administration I don't say certain
3 things I can't, but I'm very much supportive of doing
4 right by our veterans who served in peace time for
5 the property tax exemption.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: As are we. Thank
7 you so much, Commissioner. Just one question just
8 quickly. I know that a lot of our veterans who are
9 vendors have come into our offices to talk about, you
10 know, the fact that it's hard for them to get their
11 license, and when they do, then they don't have
12 existing places that are for veterans. Are we any
13 closer to having those license fees waived, and also
14 areas that are specific for street vendors who are
15 veterans within our city?

16 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Councilwoman,
17 thank you so much for that question. Veteran street
18 vendors are the closest thing to our hearts I think
19 in the veteran community in New York City. I don't
20 think you can get any more New Yorker than a street
21 vendor and someone who served our country and now is
22 serving the constituents both tourists and residents
23 here in the City. We're constantly embracing
24 legislation and programmatic solutions to how we can
25 help them. On the topic of free waivers, again, very

1
2 much like the Commissioner said in terms of the tax
3 exemption, we're always in support of discussing
4 ideas. We would have to discuss that with the
5 appropriate city agencies who that funding affects,
6 but nonetheless, we're welcome to those
7 conversations. I also just want to call out that the
8 Street Vending Advisory Board, we are in support of
9 that Street Vending Advisory Board to have veteran
10 representation and to explore how that is more of a
11 concrete advocate on there. I think it's something
12 that City Council and the street vendor community as
13 a whole would appreciate.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Again, agreed.
15 Thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Just before I call
17 on Council Member Paladino, on the Cold War veterans,
18 if we did pass that, did your-- have your-- have you
19 looked at the numbers, by the way? How much it would
20 cost the State or City in tax revenue?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We weren't able to
22 put the numbers together because we did our estimate
23 of how many veterans we believe are peace time era
24 who owned property. At the same time, what we
25 weren't able to do, Mr. Chair, was get an idea of

1
2 what is the-- of those, how many own property valued
3 at this tranche, how many own property valued at this
4 tranche, and by this tranche, things that could be
5 used to help do the back end--

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Well,
7 but you could do kind of a rough estimate, because
8 we're not-- I don't think we're talking about a lot
9 of money here. That's what my argument would be.
10 We're not talking about millions or-- and millions of
11 dollars here that the state would have to, you know,
12 obviously would lose. It's a small exemption, and
13 it's something I think that we should do. And I know
14 you're supporting it, even though, you know, another
15 side of you can't say that, but I know that you
16 support it, because it would certainly be a deduction
17 that they earned and deserve, the Cold War veterans.
18 But anyway, if you could somehow-- your agency can
19 figure it out or at least do a rough estimate, that
20 would be a good argument to take to our colleagues.

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Because I think
22 what's tough here is this is squarely in the realm of
23 the Finance Commissioner, and he has the receipts as
24 far as having the data to get these estimates--

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing]

Alright, then we'll work on it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, but I agree with you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks. Thank you. Council Member Paladino, questions?

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Good afternoon everybody, how are you? Thank you. I have a few questions. Resource and service referrals-- the first four months of the Fiscal Year 24, 1,543 veterans and family members were referred to resources and services at an increase of 49.5 percent, as compared to the 1,032 people that were assisted in the same time period through Fiscal Year 23. In Fiscal Year 23, the number of veterans and their families whom referred to resources was 2,918, a decline of 59.5 percent since Fiscal Year 22 when it was 7,000 veterans. DVS has a target of 5,000 screenings for Fiscal Year 2024. Can you walk us through why the number of referrals has been fluctuating so significantly, that's one. Two, how many veterans have referred to resources to-date in 24, and does DVS anticipate hitting the target in 2024?

SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Council Member

Paladino, thank you for joining us. It's an excellent question. Well, I think what we can first do is call out what the Commissioner mentioned in the testimony is that the agency has not-- and just like our fellow sister agencies-- any shortage of crises or things that are occurring out of our control. So some of the, I think, the reductions that you've referenced in your questions, those are correlated with the pandemic. but as you see the increase go up again and the significant increase in service referrals that we're making, that's more, I think, reflective of as I mentioned earlier, the partnerships that we've been able to establish with your City Council offices, our pop-up veteran resource centers, and our social media and event outreach. So, more about getting out to the community, getting in front of veterans to have conversations with them has been a key of ours, but to really point out the fluctuation in data, that is purely of the-- we are a-- we were a brand new agency in 2016. The Commissioner came in 2020. The pandemic occurred in 2020 to 2022. Now we have a new crisis in our hands, as you know. So there's

1
2 constant challenges that we face that are applying
3 pressure to the agency in various ways, and we have
4 to continue to be nimble on our feet to create new
5 partnerships as we have with all of you to make sure
6 that we're delivering the services that our veterans
7 deserve wherever they are.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: The other
9 question I have is, you know, concerning the mental
10 health. You know, we have the pop-up resource center
11 in my office every other Wednesday. I want to give a
12 shout out to Tania Thomas [sp?] for doing the
13 fantastic work that she's doing. We have a lot of
14 family members that come in that are either widowed,
15 or it's a sister or a brother. What are we doing as
16 far as the spouses go and the family members go to
17 help address their mental health issues that they're
18 having at this late date, after-- you know, because a
19 lot them are Vietnam vets. So they're suffering, and
20 I just want to know what are we doing to help them?
21 How is the City of New York and the State of New York
22 helping them?

23 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Council Member,
24 I'll start-- or Commissioner?

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, I mean-- for
3 us, when we-- our mandate-- and thank you for the
4 question, too, Council Member. Our mandate is to
5 focus on the veteran and their families.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah.

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And for us it's the
8 same offerings that we provide to our, you know, our
9 veterans we also make available to families. A lot
10 of it, which we put on nyc.gov/vetmentalhealth--
11 those are-- it's referrals to different organizations
12 that support in these areas, and it's making
13 referrals to different service providers through Vet
14 Connect, and so it's those types of things that we're
15 doing. You know, Madam Councilwoman, so a lot of it
16 is-- it's referrals on the mental health side. We
17 have a mental health expert in-house, but it's not
18 something that we directly triage ourselves. So
19 often time it's, you know, letting our veteran
20 military families know about different services that
21 are available to them.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Now, we were
23 talk-- my Council Member here, my colleague, Joan
24 Ariola, brought up the vending. We have a lot of
25 vendors in District 19, a lot of illegal vending,

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2 vendors. What can we do to facilitate our veterans
3 to become licensed vendors so that they could do what
4 they need to do to earn a living? Because we see a
5 lot of illegal. Now with the migrants that are
6 coming in, they're just setting up their carts and
7 doing their business. I just want to know what we
8 could do to help you.

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is one of the
10 things that we try to leverage our Veteran Business
11 Leadership Association to help with. It's
12 specifically formed to help provide technical
13 assistance to our veteran entrepreneurs so that they
14 can better navigate these paths. Also, we have our
15 map of veteran-owned businesses which we always
16 encourage our veterans to place their establishments
17 on-- it's nyc.gov/vetbizmap-- to be discoverable,
18 because for us the goal is that if a larger
19 corporation or a larger foundation is looking at
20 contracting with someone, that they can find our
21 people in that way. So for us, it's the two-pronged
22 approach between the technical assistance. More
23 information there is nyc.gov/vetbusiness. And then
24 the-- just it being discoverable, Madam Councilwoman.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Are you having
3 a lot of people come out to apply, veterans coming
4 out to apply for these applications to become vendors
5 or has it slowed down, leveled out?

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good-- I can't
7 speak directly to street vendors. I can speak to--
8 one of our prior hearings where we said we estimate
9 there to be 976 veteran-owned businesses in the City
10 of New York, and right now the map-- I don't have the
11 exact number. It's like 409 or so, now that we've
12 made a higher number, that we do have that we are
13 aware of. So is this a way where we try to get folks
14 to come under the umbrella so we could see them and
15 better help.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And I remember
17 last year's hearing, because this is our first one, I
18 believe there was a vendor in the audience sitting
19 and they were-- actually had their business set up
20 outside. I believe it was the Museum of Natural
21 History whereas he sleeps in his truck for fear that
22 if he moves it so much as a few feet or chooses to go
23 home-- like he has to have a family member come and
24 stay-- he will lose his spot. What kind of insurance
25 are we doing to make sure that these vendors have

1
2 their secured locations, the way they used to have
3 many years ago?

4 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Councilwoman, I
5 do know that vendor you're talking about. That's the
6 Hot Dog King.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Right, that's
8 him, exactly.

9 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Excellent
10 vendor and long-time, you know, great advocate and
11 champion for street vendor veteran community. We
12 have an ongoing-- we have an ongoing dialogue within
13 the enforcement and the security of specific
14 locations. That is a topic that we continuously
15 discuss with our fellow city agencies. These streets
16 are not necessarily rental properties. So it's not
17 as if, you know, there is a plot that is regularly--

18 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: [interposing]
19 Years ago there used to be. You used to have your
20 territory.

21 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: [interposing]
22 Yeah, right.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah, like
24 that's where you were and that's where you stayed,
25 and you know you go to go Jim the hot dog guy. He was

1 always there every day and nobody ever took his spot.
2 But what I'm seeing today which is very different is
3 that the illegal vendors that are just making
4 themselves right to home, and they don't budge, and
5 our guys who are here legally and want to set up a
6 legal business are having a hard time in doing so.
7 So, just want to make sure the right guys get the
8 right positions in the right spot.

10 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: That's right,
11 Councilwoman. I think one thing to take away from
12 this is ensuring that there's-- that doesn't result
13 in an oversaturation of street vendors in--

14 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: [interposing]
15 Yeah, and we're having that.

16 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: You know, and
17 that's something our community is very passionate
18 about.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Thank you.

20 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: There are
21 certain privileges and preferences that they were
22 awarded, as you know, from the unlimited permits and
23 fee waivers to unlimited permits to get into-- get
24 their applications seen, and there's good reason for
25 that, and so that's why there's such a significant

1
2 amount of advocacy to ensure that they keep caps on
3 those other legal permitting. And then as far as
4 illegal permitting, whenever we're notified of
5 anything like that, we appropriately, you know,
6 notify the agencies that are responsible for
7 enforcement, yes. You're welcome.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I just want to add
9 too that we-- for us, we try to create opportunities
10 for our street vending community to come together and
11 have face time with the different stakeholders in
12 this space, and we did something like this this past
13 November where we brought representatives from Parks,
14 from Police Department, from Sanitation, you know,
15 and other agencies there. We also have a website
16 where-- I think it's nyc.gov/vetvendor or
17 vetstreetvendor. I'll get that to you in a sec. It's
18 vetvendor, I'm sorry, nyc.gov/vetvendor where we make
19 the contact information for all of the appropriate
20 agencies that are there. So if a veteran has an
21 issue, they know exactly who to go to about that
22 issue. And so between the veteran [inaudible]
23 Business [sic] Association, between the map [sic],
24 between trying to constantly have communication with
25 our people, we're trying to set things up where if a

1
2 veteran street vendor has an issue, we can help
3 accommodate that. And it's important to us very much
4 so that we legally add veteran positions to the
5 street vendor advisory board. That's the true seat
6 at the table. That's very important to us. So we
7 are supportive of any measures taken to just legally
8 make that fix so we can have one of our own in those
9 discussions.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and getting
11 all the agencies on the same page has been the most
12 difficult part that we-- it's going on for years. So
13 are we-- we are getting-- gaining some ground at
14 least in this. We-- you know, a fewer complaints
15 from our veteran vendors, is that the case that
16 you're seeing?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I believe so. I
18 believe that compared to where we were one, two years
19 ago that we're in a better place.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright.

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And one of the
22 things, too, a lot of it is I don't know who to go
23 to.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And we tried to
3 demystify that. And so once again it's
4 nyc.gov/vetvendors. So someone knows exactly who to
5 go to from each of the involved agencies.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We're going to have a
7 -- in the future, we're going to have a hearing again
8 on this, because it-- to see, you know, to gauge are
9 we improving the situation on the streets for our
10 veterans, veteran vendors. A few more questions,
11 Commissioner, and then we'll let you go. In the
12 November plan, there was an adjustment for the Joseph
13 P. Dwyer Peer Support Program which added \$816,000 in
14 Fiscal Year 24, and \$416,000 to the baseline starting
15 in Fiscal Year 2025. What services does this program
16 provide actually, and where are they located?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for that
18 question. So the Dwyer program, it's a program
19 launched by New York State to seed help-seeking
20 activities for veterans. And so different
21 municipalities receive the money and do things
22 differently with it, and the money typically flows
23 through the Office of mental Health into whatever the
24 local Department of Health is for that municipality,
25 and then two, if they have a veteran's organization,

1 the veterans' organization. And so for us, we're in
2 the stage now where the goal for us is to not-- many
3 municipalities-- I have colleagues I've spoken to,
4 county veteran service offices, leads for their
5 counties where everything from I've hired one
6 nonprofit to run all Dwyer programs, I've seen that.
7 To, I took the Dwyer money and hired claims people,
8 because that's something that we really need. I've
9 seen that. For us we're the only municipality that's
10 receiving this money and said, look, we want to put
11 as much of it as possible on the table for our
12 community to vie for that they might be funded in a
13 hyper-local way. So if a local veteran organization
14 would like to do some sort of event, some sort of
15 activity that they can apply for the funding. I've
16 been told by the MOCS Commissioner that this will be
17 released this week as far as veteran entities being
18 able to apply to become vetted, you know, and able to
19 receive that money. As far as the funding amount,
20 it's to be \$416,000 per year in the future. We
21 receive money from 2022, 2023, and 2024 all at once.
22 So when we look at a blip in it, it's because we just
23 got into this.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It was combined,
3 yeah.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's got-- yeah.
5 And then we had a spot, an emphasis where we needed
6 to spend the 2022 money right away. [inaudible] it
7 completely, you know, the age [sic] so to speak. And
8 so that, we leveraged the request for express
9 interest which we had 19 respondent, and we got
10 information from the community about things. Of
11 those, we said, okay, let's-- through micro-
12 purchases-- fund four projects. One is a Zumba
13 project involving American Legion Post in Harlem.
14 Another is equine therapy in partnership with
15 Columbia University. Another is like a Habitat for
16 Humanity style project in queens at a VSO where it's
17 about veterans coming together to refurbish this
18 American Legion Post. And another is yoga on Staten
19 Island, and there have been 56 beneficiaries of folks
20 whom we're tracking who've utilized it thus far for
21 that legacy funding that was pushed.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. There was a
23 PEG in the November Plan which eliminated a DVS
24 contract for Job Path platform, generating savings of
25 \$239,000 in Fiscal Year 24, and \$236,000 in Fiscal

1
2 Year 25, and \$238,000 in Fiscal Year 26 and the out-
3 years. What services does this contract provide?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Job Path-- thank
5 you for the question. Job Path, it provided
6 licensing and software for an online platform that
7 allowed the military-affiliated community to explore
8 opportunities in city government as well as connect
9 directly with hiring managers to see how they best
10 can prepare for applications and interviews. The
11 platform also included a translation tool that gave
12 recommendations based on the user's military
13 occupational specialty.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But, you know, how
15 did the DVS come to a decision to eliminate this
16 contract? What's the problem?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: For us it was on the
18 heels of other PEGs leading up, and we got to a place
19 where we had to find the savings from something, and
20 for this, the-- it's a digital employment tool.
21 There exists additional employment tool that the
22 Department of Defense has called Credentialing
23 Opportunities Online and a subsequent peer tool call
24 Mill Gears [sic] that accomplishes the same effects.
25 And since we first entered the subscription with Job

1 Path, the DOD's tool has advanced significantly.
2 We're in talks with DOD also, and we saw what they
3 are doing and we said look, it's painful to have to
4 reduce something, but recognizing the duplication of
5 services if we have to make a cut, this will be where
6 we will cut.
7

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright. There's a--
9 and just a couple more questions. There's a concern
10 about potential closures of American Legions, VFWs
11 and veterans halls within the city which offer
12 crucial support to struggling veterans, and some
13 mentorship, among other things. It's a way to gather
14 with veterans. And it's, you know, it's near and
15 dear to me, because I have a lot of veteran halls in
16 the VSOs in my district. So how is DVS and the City
17 assisting these organizations and working to ensure
18 their continue operation? Because if we lose them--
19 and we're losing some every year. So, what is DVS
20 doing and the City doing to try to keep them open?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is another one
22 of those questions, because this was on the surface,
23 and there's undercurrent, and I want to speak to
24 what's deeper here. We need to have more young
25 veterans, more transitioning service members join

1 these VSOs at the end of the day. That's the real
2 piece of it. on the surface, you know, we do have a-
3 - you know, a member of our Physical Ops team who
4 serves as ombudsman so if veterans have questions on
5 the contracting or the VSOs do, they can ask us these
6 things. We also welcome our VSOs to receive technical
7 assistance through the veteran business leadership
8 association as we would with any veteran business
9 enterprise. But underneath that it's inspiring and
10 motivating more transitioning service members to say
11 look, I want to join that Disabled Veterans Chapter.
12 I want to join that Veterans of Foreign Wars Chapter,
13 that American Legion Chapter. And so this goes back
14 to the work we've done to get the DOD to tell us who
15 the transitioning service members are. We estimate
16 3-5,000 of all 200,000 people who leave the military
17 each year, 3-5,000 come to New York. Many come here
18 from school, and so for us, it's how do we best
19 engage you? Once we've engaged you, let's say hey,
20 would you like to join one of the veteran service
21 organizations. Click here if you agree to us giving
22 that VSO your contact information so they can follow
23 up, and that ties back to there being a liaison
24 citywide for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, for the
25

1 American Legion. We're working to get one for DAV.
2 And so we're hoping that through this modality, year
3 not just organic promotion, etcetera, but also
4 through literally reaching out to people just getting
5 out and saying, hey, would you like for us to plug
6 you into this local organization? That can be a way
7 to get an injection of young talent into our
8 entities.
9

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and some VSOs
11 are doing a good job in that, because they're
12 recruiting more. We're hearing, though, from the
13 VSOs that they are struggling to respond to
14 violations they receive from the Department of
15 Buildings, and I fully understand the importance of
16 maintaining the structural integrity of all buildings
17 in the City of New York, but the important thing is
18 to try to work with the VSOs and DOB to try to ensure
19 their safety, obviously of the building, but also not
20 penalize our veterans, our VSOs who are obviously
21 struggling to support these buildings. So, are you--
22 do you ever jump into the fray here? Like, if DOB
23 gets involved, do you actually call them and say,
24 look, can you give them a break on this or can you
25 give them any other 60 days? Or is there somewhere

1
2 we could work together so they're not penalized,
3 because some of the VSOs go out of business because
4 of this?

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: A couple of things,
6 I'm-- just as an aside, I feel like--

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] I know
8 you got to adhere to the law, but I mean, do you ever
9 step in? Because I've tried stepping in, in my
10 office.

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is something
12 that we've met with, you know, Commissioner Jimmy
13 Oddo from the Department of Buildings about. We
14 discussed about this situation specifically.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Good, good.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't want to get
17 ahead of anything that buildings is trying to do, but
18 I can say that I am certain that this is something
19 that's near and dear to, you know, the building
20 Commissioner's heart as far as what we can do in this
21 area. For us, something we're trying to address here
22 is can we work with local unions to assist in certain
23 things as far as instructing the VSOs on how to avoid
24 certain things and helping them with triaging certain
25 issues, too, even if it's gratis [sic] as far as it's

1
2 a trading opportunity for that union, but it's a
3 benefit for that department-- for that veteran
4 services organization.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's a great idea.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And that's been our
7 way of trying to work. while we know that Department
8 of Buildings is looking at what options they have
9 available to them, because I'm tracking that some of
10 the top fines involved-- low pressure boiler
11 compliance is a top fine, and issues involving, you
12 know, just boiler issues ultimately.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And it's 81
15 violations that tie in in these ways; 14 are not
16 having a certificate of completion; 11 violations are
17 incremental penalties where it's just been piling up
18 because it hasn't been accounted for. So, 81
19 violations largely deal with boiler issues, not all,
20 but largely, and then you have 14 where there's no
21 certificate of completion, and then 11 where there
22 are incremental penalties that are built up. And so
23 this is something we're in constant talks with DOB
24 about it or we're trying to work the union in to see

1
2 if there's some way we can provide some gratis
3 support and education to our VSOs.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. Well, there's
5 some very good ideas with that. That's-- and we do
6 have-- we're working on legislation also to give
7 extra time to some of the VSOs to cure their
8 situation rather than fine them. They could get a
9 warning. I think that would be the-- an appropriate
10 bill. Just again, two more questions. You know, I
11 think it's my priority, and I think it's your
12 priority that all of the City's veterans receive the
13 support and services that they need obviously. So
14 what resources would be required to appoint one DVS
15 liaison per City Council district to serve as a
16 dedicated outreach representative for veterans? I
17 know my office has it. I think, Paladino, Council
18 Member Paladino has-- and Ariola, do you-- you know,
19 see that's where we-- Marmorato-- we have a lot of
20 veterans in our district. So what would that entail
21 in funding to have 51 liaisons for all the Council
22 offices?

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Couple of things to
24 say. Just, once again, levels that-- we're
25 estimating 23,821 of our veterans if they applied for

1
2 service-connected disability compensation from the
3 VA, they'd get it. So I just want to start with
4 that. Roughly 24,000 folks who right away-- and
5 that's just service connected disability. That's not
6 even other aspects of VA claims, because that's one
7 piece. Another piece is it's a question of if you
8 want just someone who's an outreach person or someone
9 who is a claims accredited person who can help with
10 claims. I personally argue, and I would argue that
11 those who've had VRCs would say that having someone
12 who can do the claims, that's the work. That's the
13 key thing. And so if that's the case, you're really
14 talking about having someone at the salary of say, a
15 community coordinator which is, you know, just under
16 \$60,000 available for, you know, the 51 council
17 districts. It's a lot. I just want to call that out.
18 But to me, if you meet this question that you're
19 asking, it really is having someone who can work this
20 thing fulltime and who's accredited to do claims
21 work, and it's-- that's the best way to attack it,
22 Mr. Chair.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And we're not--
24 we're talking about once every two weeks. We're not
25 talking about every day to come in. We're--

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] Good
3 point, so that's-- so these are-- so for me, that's--
4 so this is more so me laying out the, you know-- it's
5 once every two weeks, then there's the math that
6 concur behind that, which I'm sorry I haven't done
7 with--

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] So, you
9 wouldn't have to hire 51, you know.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yep, you don't have
11 to-- but if you're telling me, well, okay, I've got
12 once every two weeks by how many, you know, offices
13 and knowing that you have to give someone time to
14 actually do the work not just in that office. The
15 office, a lot of intake discussions are occurring. A
16 lot of initial things are occurring, but that person
17 will need time to actually work behind the scenes to
18 repair things. So you'd say maybe a one-day, you
19 know, at least one day not in the office just working
20 for each facing clients.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but have you
22 worked up a model for that? Let's say it's a goal.

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I haven't, but I'm
24 just laying foundations for it.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, we'll let Jason
3 work on that. Alright, Jason?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: But the foundations
5 for the good of the group is that to have someone
6 who's doing this fulltime--

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Right.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: As far as five days
9 a week is, you know, you tell yourself \$60,000, and
10 then to go back saying hey, for each district you're
11 talking about one day on, one day off as far as one
12 day visible and there meeting folks, one day working
13 on that same-- those claims and whatnot. And so
14 that's enough to get the more math together--

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] And
16 maybe there are potential grants out there that we
17 could tap into.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to throw to
19 Jason on this point.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's what-- yeah.

21 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Yes, so first
22 off, Chair, again excellent question, and I want to
23 thank you and the Queens delegation for inviting us
24 to talk about what benefits claims coordinator would
25 look like. So I would reference that he cost

1 associated with that, we hope, could be considered
2 again by the delegation that we submitted in our
3 testimony. In the near future, we hope to share the
4 same as it relates to the other boroughs and what
5 cost differences they are, because there are
6 different number of Council Members in each borough.
7 So we do intend to share that information with every
8 borough delegation so that they're aware of what that
9 cost is, and you know, at the appropriate time
10 consider those financial costs. But to the
11 Commissioner's point, the federal legislation that is
12 Senate 106, it's the Commitment to Veterans Support
13 and Outreach Act. This is something that we and our
14 state directors across the country all support.
15 Every state direction in all 50+ states support this
16 bill, and this bill would allow for the VA to provide
17 funding to increase the number of service officers
18 per county and enhance the outreach to assist with
19 the development and submission of claims. So I will
20 be more than happy to share more information about
21 that bill to each of your offices so that you guys
22 can track it, and if you'd like to work with us to
23 submit a resolution, a letter of support--
24
25

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2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] That'd
3 be great.

4 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: [inaudible] We'd
5 appreciate that.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, terrific.

7 And my final question is RTM therapy. Various
8 studies have demonstrated that reconsolidation of
9 traumatic memories known as RTM and meditation are
10 effective approaches to addressing Post Traumatic
11 Stress Disorder and other mental health concerns
12 around veterans. Has DVS explored collaborating with
13 other city agencies or nonprofits to pilot a program
14 to provide RTM and meditation classes for our city's
15 veterans?

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, we have spoken
17 with the Office of Community and Mental Health about
18 RTM which we wholeheartedly support. We've also
19 helped spread the work about the Walter Reed study
20 that is currently involving the RNR project, and you
21 know, we know that they are tied with, you know,
22 Operation Warrior Shield, one of our nonprofits in
23 the community. So, as far as we are very bullish on
24 RTM and we enjoy what they do, and we have-- we can
25 de-socialize [sic] this accordingly, Mr. Chair.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, because there
3 are-- you know, and again, my office is prepared to
4 put money aside for a small study that would-- you
5 know, it would be like let's say I funded a \$50,000,
6 we can see the outcomes. We're not talking about a
7 lot of money, again. And we're not talking-- with
8 RTM, at least, it's not that long. It could be five
9 sessions where you can see a difference in the
10 veteran. So I think that's worth exploring. It's
11 worth some seed money that we do more outreach and
12 more kind of programs and monitor the results of
13 that. So let's get behind it. I think we're both--
14 in mental health we're not doing enough, we know
15 that, as a country. So, if we at least try to come
16 up with solutions-- and RTM seems very promising. I
17 know we grasp on to things like that, you know,
18 things that we want to work, but this one seems to
19 have the outcomes already in the smaller studies. So
20 if we could get behind that, I'd appreciate it.
21 Thank you, Commissioner. Thank you again.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: On RTM, Mr. Chair--

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Yeah.
24
25

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: we will get the
3 word out when and if that time comes, as far as hey,
4 we're looking for folks--

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Right.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: to-- you know, on
7 either end of it, between people who are trained at
8 the Council in the modality or folks who need it.
9 Like we're happy to get that word out when that time
10 comes [inaudible].

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, the great
12 thing with RTM, there's a lot of doctors that are
13 already trained. That was the problem to try to get
14 doctors trained. They've done that. So it's almost
15 like in every community you can find a doctor trained
16 in RTM therapy. So that's why it's convenient. It's
17 not just going into Manhattan. You can get it-- RTM
18 trained doctors in every community practically, even
19 Long Island. So I think there's enough of doctors,
20 because I did do the research on it, and so I did
21 actually recommend some veterans for that therapy and
22 they seem to love it so far, so. Thank you,
23 Commissioner, again. Thank you and your staff for a
24 terrific hearing and I appreciate it.

25 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much.

1
2 SENIOR ADVISOR LOUGHRAN: Thank you.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, we're going to
4 open the hearing to public testimony. I remind
5 members of the public that this is a formal
6 government proceeding and that decorum shall be
7 observed at all times. As such, members of the
8 public shall remain silent at all times. The witness
9 table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No
10 video recordings or photography is allowed from the
11 witness table. Further, members of the public may
12 not present audio or video recordings as testimony,
13 but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the
14 Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.
15 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill
16 out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and
17 wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will
18 have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic on
19 the Preliminary Budget. If you have a written
20 statement or additional written testimony you wish to
21 submit for the record, please provide a copy of that
22 testimony to the Sergeant at Arms. Regina, please
23 call our first panel.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: The first panel will
25 be Erin Verrier or Verrier, Timothy Pena, Marcos

1
2 Stafne and Cleopatra Brown. If you'll please just
3 come up and take a seat, and you may begin when you
4 are ready.

5 ERIN VERRIER: Alright, hi, and thank you
6 all for having me to present today. My name is Erin
7 Verrier, and I am the Manager of Policy and External
8 Affairs at Community Healthcare Network, otherwise
9 known as CHN. We are a federally-qualified health
10 center with 14 sites citywide that provide critical
11 primary care and social services for patients. We
12 reach over 50,000 individuals annually, and we
13 welcome patients of all ages regardless of their
14 ability to pay. So while our services are many, I'm
15 here today to speak about the work we do for
16 veterans. CHN's Military Health and Wellness Program
17 provides a comprehensive array of services to
18 veterans and their families, from onsite mental
19 healthcare to primary care services. Each program
20 participants is screened and assessed for mental
21 health needs by a licensed clinical social worker,
22 and can as needed receive referrals to CHN's
23 Behavioral Health Team. Accordingly, participants can
24 access behavioral health services like individual and
25 family counseling, psychiatry and medication

1 management and be connected to other services like
2 legal support, medical care, dental services, and
3 more. Today, our program serves up to 100 patients
4 annually. The Military Health and Wellness program
5 is also unique in its collaboration with the Veterans
6 Advocacy Project which provides legal support
7 services, assistance with public benefits, VA claims,
8 discharge upgrade applications, housing, and other
9 civil legal issues. The Veterans Advocacy Projects
10 works with CHN staff to ensure continuity of care and
11 provide staff training on cultural competency when
12 working with veterans and understanding their legal
13 needs. In all, we greatly appreciate the support we
14 receive from City Council for our program, and look
15 for this funding to continue moving forward, as it is
16 an honor to serve our veteran population. I
17 appreciate the time to share our program with you.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

19 DR. CLEOPATRA BROWN: Good morning. My
20 name is Doctor Cleopatra Brown. I am a Cold War
21 veteran with a service-connected disability. I
22 served six years in the United States Navy on active
23 duty, followed by two years in the Navy Reserves. I
24 am a homeowner in Brownsville. My father was also a
25

1
2 veteran who served in the Korean War. I am the
3 Chairperson of Community Board 16 Veterans Affairs
4 Committee, the founder of Brooklyn's Veterans
5 Appreciation parade and resource fair, and the Chair
6 Friends for Veterans. I am proud to say that I am a
7 veteran. I thank the New York City Council Committee
8 on Veterans for this opportunity to speak on behalf
9 of Community Board Three and Community Board 16
10 Veterans Committee and those veterans who are unable
11 to attend the budget hearing. On behalf of Community
12 Board Three and Community Board 16 Veterans Affairs
13 Committee, I stand before this committee for the
14 following reasons: Real property tax exemption for
15 Cold War veterans. We respectfully request that the
16 New York City Department of Finance recognize and
17 consider establishing a real property tax exemption
18 for Cold War veterans under the New York State Real
19 Property Tax Law 458B. Currently, upstate New York
20 and several counties in New York State including
21 Hampstead, Rockland, Suffolk, and Nassau Counties
22 have adopted the legislation that established real
23 property tax exemption for Cold War veterans,
24 including those who served during the Lebanon War.
25 However, according to the New York City Department of

1 Finance, only veterans who served during the
2 following conflicts qualify for real property tax
3 exemption, that's the World War I, World War II,
4 Korean, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan
5 veterans. Cold War veterans are being told that they
6 do not qualify as veterans because of the New York
7 City Real Property Tax Exemption Law does not
8 recognize them. Also, number two, veteran's
9 preference for affordable housing. Veterans should be
10 given preference when applying for HPD newly-
11 constructed developments listed in Housing Connect.
12 Currently, Community Board residents receive 50
13 percent preference, and City employees receive 10
14 percent preference, but veterans, those who have
15 served and protected and fought for this country's
16 democracy receive no preference. We respectfully
17 press that the veterans be given 30 percent
18 preference to affordable houses listed in Housing
19 Connect and the condo home ownership process being
20 created in New York City. Third-- I'm almost
21 finished-- jobs for veterans. We kindly request your
22 assistance in collaborating with state and federal
23 elected officials to create legislation that will
24 reserve job opportunities for veterans at the City,
25

1 State, and Federal levels. This will allow them to
2 receive credit to their military service time which
3 will be added to their years of civilian service,
4 thereby increasing their retirement annuity. We also
5 suggest increasing the budget to hire and train
6 veteran's specialists to work in non-veteran
7 healthcare facilities and city workplaces to assist
8 veterans in obtaining the necessary benefits and
9 disability compensation they are entitled to.
10 Fourth, transition from military to home portal. We
11 respectfully request that you increase the budget to
12 develop a portal exclusively for veterans. The
13 portal should contain a list of city, state, and
14 federal jobs set aside for veterans, as well as
15 affordable HPD units for them and their families. We
16 will ensure that when service men and women return
17 home from active duty they can easily apply for these
18 jobs and housing units which are exclusively
19 earmarked to them. Legal services-- we request that
20 funds be allocated to legal services organizations
21 serving veterans to assist with submitting and
22 appealing claims for disability compensation and
23 discharge upgrades for those unfairly given "other
24 than honorable" or "dishonorable" discharges due to
25

1 racism and discrimination. Community organizations--
2 we kindly request that you increase the budget to
3 allocate funds to local veteran organizations such as
4 but not limited to the American Legion Post, the
5 Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of
6 America, Black Vets for Social Justice, and the
7 National Association of Black Military Women. In
8 addition, providing funding to Community Board with
9 veteran committees to conduct outreach events aimed
10 at providing veterans with resources, and informing
11 them of the benefits to which they are entitled. I
12 conclude, Korean veterans were left behind, Vietnam
13 veterans left behind, and Cold War veterans left
14 behind. We cannot continue allowing a generation of
15 veterans to be lost, because we failed to speak up
16 and speak out against the heartfelt issues concerning
17 our veterans. I stand on the founding principle of
18 the Vietnam Veterans of America, never again will one
19 generation of veterans abandon another. We cannot
20 undo the past, but we can take this opportunity to
21 re-evaluate how we are treating our veterans in the
22 present. President Biden eloquently stated, "The
23 only truly sacred obligation we have is to prepare
24 and equip those women and men we sent into harm's way
25

1 and care for them and their families when they return
2 home. It brings us together to make sure that men
3 and women who are willing to lay down their lives for
4 us get the very best from us in return. May God bless
5 you. May God bless the New York City Veterans
6 Committee, and may God bless all that gathers here
7 together. Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Dr.
10 Brown. Thank you.

11 MARCOS STAFNE: Chairman Holden and the
12 esteemed members of the Committee of Veterans. My
13 name is Marcos Stafne, Executive Director of
14 GallopNYC, and I'm here to advocate for a
15 reinstatement of \$85,000 dollars in funding for our
16 veterans program. For over 11 years we've provided
17 therapy to horsemanship programs at no cost to our
18 veterans at our locations in Queens and Brooklyn.
19 Specifically, GallopNYC Forest Hills, and Gallop NYC
20 Sunrise Stables located in Howard Beach. Our program
21 offers veterans invaluable opportunities for healing
22 and growth through interactions with horses,
23 fostering mindfulness, teamwork, and improved
24 communication skills. Therapeutic horsemanship has
25 been proven effective in alleviating symptoms of

1
2 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and brain injuries,
3 empowering veterans to lead healthy and productive
4 lives. We also see veterans give back to our
5 community that serves New Yorkers with disabilities
6 as they volunteered their time to assist others in
7 adaptive horseback riding. With your support, we can
8 continue providing weekly riding lessons and access
9 to our facilities, ensuring that cost is not a
10 barrier to access for our veterans and their
11 families. I invite each of you to witness firsthand
12 the transformative impact of our veterans program at
13 GallopNYC Sunrise Stables in Howard Beach. Your
14 support is essential in honoring the commitment and
15 sacrifice of our veterans. Thank you for your time
16 and consideration.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Chair, if I
18 might? I just want to really reiterate what was
19 already said. GallopNYC is an incredible resource
20 for our veterans, for our seniors, for our young
21 people, and the work that you do at Sunrise Stables
22 is amazing. And you know, we come down there with
23 the staff, and you know, you're just always there for
24 the community. I invest my constituents' tax dollars
25 in GallopNYC, and I really hope that my colleagues

1
2 will do the same, because you help people across the
3 five boroughs, not just in the community that you
4 are. So thank you for the work that you're doing.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Doctor.
6 Thank you.

7 TIMOTHY PENA: Good morning.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Mic.

9 TIMOTHY PENA: Oh, good morning. Nice to
10 see you, Chairman Holden. My name is Timothy Pena.
11 I run an organization called the Forgotten Veteran.
12 I'm here today to talk about mental health and the
13 veterans who are currently in our shelters and in
14 need of services, and I have a couple of suggestions
15 that I would like to offer City Council. One, in
16 2016 I had pretty much crashed and burned, and I
17 ended up being homeless and in the street in Phoenix.
18 I was referred to a grant per-diem program in Phoenix
19 by the VA which is a program-- transitional program
20 set up for VA eligible veterans to receive access to
21 housing resources, mental health, nutrition and
22 various other services to help them transition from
23 homelessness into the Civilian world. I ran the front
24 desk. I was a front desk clerk for about two years
25 with Catholic Charities and ran a house in Phoenix.

1
2 I made \$300 a month as a stipend for the front desk,
3 and I also ran their social programs for another \$150
4 a month in stipend. The stipends are important
5 because what it did was it gave me confidence. It
6 also gave me job skills that I otherwise did not
7 have. And we have-- one of the main focuses was on
8 community engagement and mental health. I'm looking
9 at some of the numbers. I spent five months in Borden
10 [sic] Avenue when I first came to New York City, and
11 in the grant per-diem program, and I was
12 disappointed. From daily assaults on veterans to
13 drug overdoses and deaths. In the nearly two years
14 that I spent at Manna [sic] House in Phoenix, we
15 never had a single incident, never had a single
16 overdose, never had a single death. We are placing
17 such an emphasis on processing veterans instead-- and
18 I disagree with getting to know the veteran, having
19 them come for other services before we provide them
20 access to mental health and mental health screening.
21 I'm in supportive housing through the HASA program.
22 I had-- my apartment sat empty for months while I sat
23 in Borden Avenue being prevented from moving in
24 because of my processing. This is critical. We have
25 veterans who are sitting in our shelter for six

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2 months, eight months, year, two years and more who
3 are just stagnating. Their mental health is in
4 shambles, and one of the reasons we're seeing
5 heightened drug usage is because we pretty much lost
6 all hope. My background in transitional services and
7 background in working with transitioning veterans
8 mostly out of prison into the civilian world, that's
9 my forte. Mental health is key. Food is key.
10 Getting sleep is key, and having community engagement
11 is key to the mental health of the veterans. We can
12 go through anything if we have someone who we know
13 has our back. I disagree with, or I agree, however
14 you want to look at this. I think there needs to be
15 more mental health screening, and I think that we
16 need to put a higher emphasis on the living
17 conditions for the veterans who are living on our
18 shelters, and giving them better access to outreach
19 programs, outreach services and certainly mental
20 health, as far as things of GallopNYC, those things.
21 We-- there are programs. We're supposed to have
22 transportation for these kinds of things. When I was
23 in phoenix we had baseball tickets every game. We
24 had-- VFWs would have dinners for us. We-- football
25 games, trade shows, hiring events. In the five months

1
2 at Borden Avenue, we had none of that. So I would
3 like to put it out there that I've lived. When I
4 first went into the shelter or went into the program
5 in Phoenix, I was pretty much ready to commit
6 suicide, and when I came to New York City I had a
7 tough year, 2021, and I got pretty much within a
8 hair's breadth of committing suicide at Christmas.
9 So when I came here, I specifically looked and sought
10 out programs and opportunities where mental health
11 was going to be one of the supportive services that I
12 received, and I have that, and I'm in VA mental
13 health. One of the things that I'm seeing is not--
14 these guys are not going in, and just like
15 Commissioner Hendon said, we're not self-identifying,
16 and that's because we're not being approached and
17 we're not being approached in a way that is not
18 adversarial. So, thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Timothy.
20 Tell us about how long were you waiting for
21 supportive housing while you were at Borden. You
22 said that there was a delay. It was-- your apartment
23 was vacant. How long of a period was that?

24 TIMOTHY PENA: I had my apartment one
25 week after getting to New York City in July 2022.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you waited five
3 months--

4 TIMOTHY PENA: [interposing] Yes.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: for the processing.

6 TIMOTHY PENA: Yes.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what was the
8 answers that you got from-- was it-- what agency were
9 you applying for--

10 TIMOTHY PENA: [interposing] Sorry, but
11 DVS.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: DVS, and there was a
13 five-month delay while you knew that the apartment
14 was vacant.

15 TIMOTHY PENA: Yes.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Because I did-- when
17 I went up to visit the Bronx facility supportive
18 housing-- and where was that, by the way? Where was
19 your supportive housing?

20 TIMOTHY PENA: Mine's over on 29th Street
21 and Eighth Avenue.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, but you
23 know, in speaking to the provider they said they had
24 a lot of vacancies.

25 TIMOTHY PENA: Yeah.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Which to me, you
3 know, first of all, I don't believe Borden should
4 even be a shelter for veterans. It should be--

5 TIMOTHY PENA: [interposing] Transitional
6 program.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. Veterans
8 should go right into supportive housing. They've
9 earned that. So, that's my goal is to not have a
10 homeless shelter for veterans. And I know that's
11 something that we could do. We could do that today if
12 we just put the resolve--

13 TIMOTHY PENA: [interposing] If we wanted
14 to, we could.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Like you said, there
16 are problems at Borden. I witnessed it. However,
17 we're trying to improve it, and what I did get the
18 complaint from veterans at the Borden shelter every
19 time I go is that they're not getting the mental
20 health like you had mentioned, like they should get.
21 And so we're trying to fix that in new programs, and
22 obviously NYU has a very good program, mental health.
23 so it is-- you know, RTM is a very good, you know,
24 has some great hope to get veterans the treatment
25 they need, but we need to-- what you mentioned, we

1
2 need to really seriously look at Borden as an option,
3 and especially when supportive housing is vacant, and
4 that's what I'm hearing not only from you, but from
5 providers. And Doctor Brown, again I want to--
6 you're a great spokesperson for our veterans and keep
7 it up, because this is a very good document. I'm
8 going to use this for a lot of our recommendations.
9 We do have-- Council Member Borelli has a bill on the
10 Cold War exemptions that you had mentioned. So we're
11 going to try to get that going and hopefully pass the
12 City Council within my lifetime. But I think it's
13 very, very important that we do most of the things or
14 at least all of the things on your testimony, and I
15 thank you for that. Thank you for everyone. And I'll
16 get out to Gallop. We got to go out there. I'll do
17 that shortly. Maybe some of my colleagues will join
18 me. Alright, thank you. Thanks, panel.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much.
20 Like to call the second panel. Jeanine Costly, Peter
21 Kempner, Deirdre Rice-Reese, and MJ Okma. And you
22 may start when you all are here and ready.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We'll start from
24 this side. You want to? You can go first, yeah.

DEIRDRE RICE-REESE: Good afternoon.

Council Member Holden, good to see you again, sir.

Good to see all of you. Happy Women's History Month.

I am testifying on behalf of Samaritan Daytop

Village. I am a United States Airforce Cold War

veteran. I did not know we were going to be talking

about that today, so I was excited to hear that it's

advancing the bill. RTM another thing that excited

about for us to partner with a state organization

and/or City Council to provide a randomized study. I

know that there was a study done in 2019, about 74

veterans, but happy to have that. For those of you

who are unfamiliar with Samaritan Daytop Village, we

are one of the largest substance abuse and mental

health treatment providers in this city, and of

course have programs upstate. Our veterans' capacity

is 120 men and women, mostly in individualized,

gender-specific programming, two in New York City,

one in Queens, the other in Manhattan, and the

women's program in the Mid-Hudson [sic]-- first of

its kind for women veterans. A big part of what we

manage with City Council support is the sober

engagement and mental health supports that veterans

need to engage in. as I heard the Commissioner talk

1
2 about screening for mental health, I think a key
3 thing or a significant element would be to do a
4 smaller brief screening that would allow for the
5 introduction of information for mental health and
6 then trigger-- because there are screening tools
7 called a modified mini, other things that would
8 trigger further assessment if the veteran is willing,
9 without being intrusive at the initial interview. For
10 us, being able to support those sober engagement
11 activities such as a pilgrimage to D.C., going to the
12 monuments, going to some of the other supports-- we
13 use a serenity model for horsemanship. We use a
14 couple of other supports throughout the City that
15 allow us encourage engagement and sober engagement
16 activities for our veterans. We also need support in
17 developing our workforce, continuing to develop our
18 workforce. Some of the stigma around alcohol and
19 substance use disorders, as well as mental health
20 disorders pushes some of our veterans and others away
21 from working in the field because they don't want to
22 be judged. They don't want to be connected to having
23 a problem or have issues, and so for us, having
24 veterans supported peer recovery individuals,
25 individuals that can intern and learn how to support

1
2 other veterans, from our legends-- and that's those
3 that I call those over 50-- to our legacy, those
4 under 25, being able to really nurture and support
5 enhanced developed-- hold hands with veterans as they
6 navigate systems including DVS' system and the VA's
7 system, being able to support veterans' overall for
8 mental health, substance use disorder, and sober
9 engagement as you really are gold, and we've worked
10 really hard at being proficient at it. So, I ask you
11 all to restore and/or engage our funding, our funding
12 ask for both workforce development, sober engagement,
13 and mental health supports. And I thank you all
14 again. Happy Women's History Month. We rule.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

16 MJ OKMA: Good afternoon Chair Holden and
17 members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is MJ
18 Okma with SAGE, and I'm here to deliver testimony on
19 behalf of my colleague Bryan Ellicott who is the SAGE
20 Vets Program Manager. SAGE Vets is the only program
21 in New York designed to address the unique needs of
22 older LGBTQ+ veterans who are twice as likely to face
23 housing insecurity compared to their non-LGBTQ+
24 peers. The veterans we represent are no different
25 than any other veterans of the US military. Most are

1
2 profoundly patriotic and serve during conflicts
3 abroad, taking home with them significant trauma.
4 What is unique about the veterans that we serve is
5 they're often burdened by additional forms of trauma.
6 Discrimination against LGBTQ+ service members have
7 deeply-- that are deeply embedded in military history
8 frequently led to severe situations ranging from
9 abuse to military sexual trauma. This compounding
10 trauma can be so repressed that it goes untreated for
11 decades causing irreparable harm. Because of this,
12 many older LGBTQ+ veterans have not utilized
13 potentially life-saving services, government benefits
14 and programs that they rightfully deserve. This is
15 where SAGE Vets makes the biggest impact, helping
16 veterans get on a path to recovery and improved
17 wellness. Once we connect with a veteran, SAGE Vets
18 supports them every step of their way on their
19 healing journey at a pace that is guided by their
20 individual comfort levels. Once a veteran is ready,
21 we proceed with referrals to life-changing services
22 including mental health support, creating eligibility
23 for VA healthcare, discharge upgrades, and disability
24 compensation benefits. We also partner closely with
25 the City and State Department of Veteran's Services

1
2 and groups such as Black Veterans for Social Justice,
3 and American Military Retiree Association. SAGE Vets
4 can do this work because of the support from the City
5 Council. In the Fiscal Year 25 budget, we
6 respectfully request a restoration of \$100,000 under
7 the Legal Services for Veterans initiative to
8 continue this vital work. Because of the support
9 from the City Council, we've expanded our outreach to
10 more LGBTQ+ older veterans in every borough,
11 connecting them to our social programming and support
12 groups. We've also been able to successfully secure
13 discharge status upgrades through the restoration of
14 honor as well as aide and eviction prevention, find
15 annuity benefits, public services connections, and
16 disability rating increases for our participants.
17 More details can be found in my submitted written
18 testimony. Thank you so much.

19 PETER KEMPNER: Good afternoon, Chair
20 Holden, members of the Committee. My name is Peter
21 Kempner, and I'm the Legal Director at Volunteers of
22 Legal Service. The VOLS Veterans initiative which is
23 part of our senior law project strives to empower
24 older New Yorkers who served in the military to age
25 in place with dignity and access their legal rights

1
2 and live without fear of eviction. Our free legal
3 services assist low-income older veterans in making
4 key decisions about incapacity and end-of-life care
5 by providing last wills and testaments, powers of
6 attorney, healthcare proxies, living wills, and other
7 advance directives. These documents enable our
8 clients to ensure that their dying wishes are
9 fulfilled and that they're able to maintain income
10 and services during their lifetime. We also enable
11 our client's caregivers to make medical decisions in
12 line with their beliefs. Our guides, fact sheets,
13 workshops, and trainings are aimed at overcoming
14 confusion about planning for the future. VOLS
15 Veteran's initiative is also part of our Micro
16 Enterprise Project. For over 20 years the VOLS Micro
17 Enterprise Project has helped existing and aspiring
18 small business owners and micro entrepreneurs access
19 high-quality free legal services. For many veterans,
20 owning a small business is an effective path to
21 financial stability and independence upon their
22 return from service. VOLS aides was drafting
23 contracts, reviewing government documents, protecting
24 intellectual property and avoiding on commercial
25 leases, and recently we've been working with a number

1 of veteran vendors that were talked about earlier.
2 Each year, the United States Department of Veterans
3 Affairs conducts a survey in which participants point
4 out what are the unmet needs of veterans. In last
5 year's survey which came out in October of 2023,
6 eight out of the 10 top unmet needs were legal in
7 nature. In Fiscal Year 2024, the New York City
8 Council dedicated \$600,000 to its legal services for
9 veterans funding initiative to help bridge the access
10 to justice gap for our city's veteran communities.
11 the seven legal services providers who receive this
12 funding provide veterans with legal assistance on a
13 broad range of matters, and thanks to this
14 initiative, these legal services organizations not
15 only dedicate critical staff resources to providing
16 veterans focused legal services, but they're also
17 able to leverage these resources to harness thousands
18 of hours of pro bono support from the private bar as
19 well. A city's budget is a moral statement of
20 priorities, and with a proposed budget of over \$109
21 billion dollars for Fiscal Year 25, the amount of
22 funding dedicated to providing free legal services to
23 veterans is small but critical. It is imperative
24 that meeting the legal needs of New York City's
25

1
2 veteran community remains either at current funding
3 levels or is increased so that we as a city can
4 ensure that the legal needs of those who sacrifice in
5 service to our country are met. Thank you very much
6 for allowing us to submit this testimony, and we look
7 forward to working with you to ensuring that New York
8 City is a place where veterans feel welcome and at
9 home. Thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks, Peter.

11 Thank you so much.

12 JEANINE COSTLY: Good afternoon, Chair
13 Holden and members of the Committee on Veterans.
14 Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am
15 Doctor Jeanine Donette [sp?] Costly, Senior Vice
16 President for the Transitional Services at the
17 Institute for Community Living, or ICL. Our
18 oversight is the Borden Avenue Veterans Shelter. ICL
19 is one of the largest providers of housing and
20 behavioral health services for children, adults and
21 families. We serve 13,000 people annually in our 140
22 programs across the five boroughs, including clinics,
23 shelters, residences, and community-based programs.
24 People get better at ICL because of our whole-health
25 approach. It addresses all aspects of wellbeing and

1
2 reduces health disparities. First, Chair Holden,
3 thank you for your support of ICL's Borden Avenue
4 Veteran Shelter, New York City's only residence
5 dedicated to veterans experiencing homelessness.
6 Your leadership has helped us to secure upgrades to
7 the sleeping arrangements across the facility,
8 securing private sleeping arrangements and spaces to
9 help our veterans restore dignity for our nation's
10 heroes. Second, thank you to the New York City
11 Council to your commitment to human service workers.
12 The COLA is greatly appreciated and so needed. I'm
13 here today to talk about the City's concurrent mental
14 health and homelessness crises, particularly for our
15 city's veterans and what needs to be done to ensure
16 nonprofits like our own can help to continue to serve
17 those who are most affected. Many residents at the
18 Borden Avenue Veterans Shelter have seen combat and
19 are living with trauma related to their service, in
20 their personal lives, and in their experience of the
21 trauma of homelessness. To best support our veteran
22 residents, we encourage the development of wraparound
23 service provisions for the veteran population. This
24 would assist with mental health challenges for
25 veterans living in our adult congregate care settings

1 to achieve the treatment and community living goals
2 that they need. This whole-health support which
3 underscores everything we do at ICL would include
4 medication management, nutrition, economic and job
5 stability, and access to more permanent supportive
6 housing. We know that the added stress from unstable
7 living conditions results in poorer mental health
8 outcomes, and the lack of stable housing prestos
9 challenges for us as we offer care and support to our
10 veterans. ICL moved 100 veterans out of Borden into
11 permanent housing in Fiscal Year 22. Our newest
12 supportive housing development, the Nevins [sic]
13 Street Apartments includes 20 units for veterans, but
14 so many more units are needed. New York City has
15 reduced veterans' homelessness by nearly 90 percent
16 since 2011. In December 2015, it became the largest
17 city in the country to be certified by the Federal
18 Government for ending chronic veterans' homelessness,
19 but with the hundreds of veterans still in shelters
20 and many more in the streets, we still need to do
21 better. Moreover we need to re-envision the shelter
22 system. We are operating within a framework that
23 lacks sufficient investment and support. There have
24 been no increases or adjustments to reflect the
25

1
2 growing costs of essential items such as food,
3 insurance, and operational expenses. This trend is
4 unsustainable and it threatens the viability of
5 nonprofit organizations like our own. To compound on
6 these challenges, nonprofits like ICL must regularly
7 borrow money for services contracted by the City due
8 to delayed payments from the City. This strains our
9 financial resources and forces us to incur
10 unnecessary interest expenses. Investing in
11 nonprofit workforce is crucial to ensure our veterans
12 receive the necessary care that they deserve. Thank
13 you for this opportunity.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Doctor,
15 and ICL does a wonderful job. The Nevins Street is--
16 we should replicate that and--

17 JEANINE COSTLY: [interposing]
18 Absolutely.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And really, hearing
20 the success stories-- when we cut the ribbon to open
21 that, it was a great inspirational visit because we
22 got to speak to veterans who are really-- who told
23 their stories, and I think ICL, if we could just get
24 more funding, you're right. Especially at the Borden
25 Shelter, which I think I'd love to improve the food

1
2 there. We have a great kitchen. I'd like to bring
3 back, you know, the cooking on premises.

4 JEANINE COSTLY: We would love that,
5 Council Member.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, and so if you
7 could tell me again, and this could be offline, but
8 how much extra funding you'd need to bring that back.
9 Give me a number and we'll try to fight for the
10 number of our veterans. It's an important aspect.

11 JEANINE COSTLY: Yes.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, rather
13 than the small little trays of food that they, you
14 know, pre-package let's say, let's cook real food
15 there on the premises like we used to have before the
16 pandemic.

17 JEANINE COSTLY: We did. For food and
18 for mental health services is so needed.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Those two, yeah.
20 Those two areas are very important. And you know,
21 tell us what programs for mental health are working
22 the best that you see. Because I always like ask
23 what's the outcomes and who's doing the best job, and
24 so that's why I want to bring in RTM there and
25 possibly, you know, give more funding to NYU who I

1
2 feel they're doing a great job. We've gotten some
3 good feedback. But thank you all for your wonderful
4 testimony, and please keep in touch with my office
5 because we do have hurdles, obviously to improve some
6 of our veterans services, but you all are on the
7 front lines and I thank you for all your work on
8 behalf of our veterans. Thanks.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you to this
10 panel. Before we turn to the Zoom witnesses, we want
11 to make sure that no one else is here who wishes to
12 testify and has not yet filled out an appearance
13 card, including these people who signed up in
14 advance, Turak Kalf [sp?], Gus Stavrilocus [sp?], and
15 Bernard Wright [sp?]. Anyone else here who wants to
16 testify in person? Seeing no one, we will turn to
17 the Zoom panelists. I'll call the Zoom panelists
18 individually. Our hearing host will unmute you, and
19 our Sergeant will let you know when you can begin
20 your testimony. So we will start with the first Zoom
21 witness, Edward Schloeman.

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin. You
23 may begin.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Do we have him? Is
25 he unmuted? Edward? Alright, you want to go to the

1
2 next one and we'll figure out? We'll circle back to
3 Edward.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay, having some
5 trouble with Edward Schloeman. Let's go to our
6 second panelist. We'll come back to you. Second
7 person is Coco Culhane.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

9 COCO CULHANE: Hi.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We got you. Okay.

11 COCO CULHANE: Okay. My name's Coco
12 Culhane from the Veteran Advocacy Project. Thank you
13 for your time today. Just wanted to make a few
14 points reiterating what Peter Kempner said about how
15 important legal services are in terms of removing
16 barriers to housing and stability income. The
17 investment pays off 10-fold. Also want to urge that
18 the expansion of benefits counselors who are DVS is
19 just so critical. The feedback we're getting, the
20 people are waiting months and months from, you know,
21 the state reps to DVS or wherever. They're trying to
22 get services, because places are just overwhelmed.
23 The original eight big VSOs that were in the regional
24 office at the VA, only four are still open. It's
25 really a critical needs and I'm thrilled to hear that

1 the Council wants to support that for DVS. On
2 housing, you know, the need for legal services even
3 with the right to counsel, veterans are getting left
4 behind. We turn away so many veterans from our own
5 services because we don't have the capacity. We are
6 the subcontractor for two of the four SSVF providers
7 in New York City, and yet, you know, still just
8 cannot keep up with the need. So really hope to see
9 if not an expansion in the legal services money, you
10 know, at least staying at that level since it's so
11 critical. And then finally, want to put in another
12 push to have-- I'm not sure where the legislation is--
13 - remembering Paul Vallone and his first bill about
14 tracking services, the use of city services for
15 veterans so that we can really see what the need is
16 and what is it that veterans are accessing. Seeing
17 some kind of legislation, I think something was
18 introduced in the last year, so I'm not sure what
19 happened. I just think it's so critical that we
20 actually know what are the veterans using, where is
21 the need so that we can properly direct--

22
23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Thank
24 you. Your time has expired.

25

1
2 COCO CULHANE: not only city resources,
3 but nonprofit resources as well. Thank you.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. The next
5 witness is Crystal Brockington [sp?].

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

7 BRENDAN GIBBONS: Good morning. This is
8 not crystal. My name is Brendan Gibbons. For some
9 reason I was sent the wrong link.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, you can go
11 ahead Brendan.

12 BRENDAN GIBBONS: Okay. The reason I'm
13 on here today is I'm also a-- I'm a veteran from the
14 City. I also am the Commander of the VFW post within
15 your district, Councilman Holden. I'd like to thank
16 everybody for being here today anyway. But I also
17 just wanted to bring up quickly, I only have two
18 minutes. I just wanted to say that New York City DVS
19 has been doing a lot of outreach and unfortunately
20 they don't have enough support staff. I personally
21 experienced this. I know they changed a lot of things
22 and they're working very hard to make it better. I
23 just hope that the New York City Council decides to
24 give more funding to DVS for not only their own staff
25 because they definitely need more people processing

1
2 claims. One of the problem you have is they're doing
3 tons of outreach but we do not have people-- they
4 don't have the time to be processing the claims
5 because they're out doing the outreach. They're out
6 educating people about programs and things that are
7 available, but they don't have the time to actually
8 process it. And without more personnel, I feel like
9 they're never going to be able to accomplish that.
10 It's like a Band-Aid being put on the wound, you're
11 never actually going to be able to fix anything.
12 You're just delaying it. And I know tons of veterans
13 that have been waiting and waiting, and they cannot
14 get people to help them, and especially when it comes
15 to claims benefits it's extremely important. it's a
16 lot of money to financially help the veteran, but
17 also money that goes back into the city, and as far
18 as I'm concerned, it's one of the major things that
19 really need the help, and having gone through this
20 process myself within the last two years, I had to
21 educate myself to fight to get some benefits for
22 myself, and it's an extremely difficult process. And
23 I hope that there is more funding provided to not
24 only Department of-- New York City Department of
25 Veteran Services, but also stuff to help other VSOs

1 that are in the City like VFWs, American Legions. I'm
2 a member of many organizations, but unfortunately,
3 they all seem to be disappearing because a lot of the
4 younger veterans do not want to join for some reason.
5

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you. Time has
7 expired.

8 BRENDAN GIBBONS: At the same point, our
9 operating costs are through the roof, just like
10 everything else. So, finding donations and funding
11 is very difficult. And I thank you all.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Brendan.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Our next witness is
14 Dequincy Brown.

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I'm sorry, Dequincy
17 Bowen.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin when
19 you're ready.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Quincy, can you
21 unmute yourself. On the lower left of your screen,
22 yeah. Do we have Edward back? No? I see that he's
23 still muted. Can we unmute? Nope? Okay.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Seem to be having
25 some trouble on the muting. We will try to come back

1
2 to you, Dequincy Bowen. Can we try Doctor Kimberly
3 Moore? Kimberly Moore?

4 KIMBERLY MOORE: yes, I'm here. How are
5 you? Good morning.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, we have you.
7 Thank you.

8 KIMBERLY MOORE: Thank you. Dear,
9 Chairperson Holden, thank you for the Committee on
10 Veterans for the honor and privilege of testifying
11 before you today. My name is Doctor Kimberly Moore,
12 Director of Care Café, at the Yeshiva University's
13 Wurzweiler School of Social Work. Care Café is our
14 community-based program providing psychoeducational
15 pop-up support cafes throughout the New York metro
16 area, and our students and faculty have pioneered a
17 targeted model of embedding Care Café programs in
18 local community institutions. A portion of Care
19 Café's funding is designated for veteran services.
20 Sadly, our program's funding for the 2024 Fiscal Year
21 was cut by 98 percent and cut by 100 percent for
22 veteran's services. Over the last year, though, the
23 Care Café program has strengthened and expanded our
24 partnerships with the goal of effectively engaging
25 with service members and veterans across various

1 areas of self-promotion [sic] including but not
2 limited to self-care, suicide prevention, suicide
3 education training services, psychological first aid,
4 life transitions, and career exploration, and
5 nutrition. However, connecting veterans to the
6 necessary services and entitlements continues to be a
7 challenge due to their unidentified status. It is
8 important to note that special attention has been
9 given to the urgency of collaborative planning,
10 designing and implementation of programming between
11 the Wurzweiler School of Social Work and our veterans
12 serving community partners. These efforts have
13 included on-the-ground street outreach door-knocking
14 activities at VFWs and American Legion posts and
15 intercollegiate approaches to serving veterans with
16 foundations of empowerment and mutual aid support in
17 non-traditional settings. With each inquiry received
18 by the Care Café program to serve our veterans, we
19 are challenged by the scope and frequency of services
20 offered. There is still much work to do. It is with
21 clarity and acknowledgement that Care Café continues
22 to support their--

24 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Thank
25 you. Time is expired.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can finish up.
3 Go ahead.

4 KIMBERLY MOORE: Okay. It is with clarity
5 and acknowledgement that Care Café continue to
6 advance toward improving our efforts to serve service
7 members and veterans. However, without the financial
8 support of the City Council we will continue to
9 experience severe limitations to our capacity and
10 saddened [sic] by the limitations of services we can
11 offer to veterans and families in need. In closing,
12 on behalf of the Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler
13 School of Social Work Care Café program, we humbly
14 ask for your support. We thank you for the
15 opportunity to share at today's meeting and we look
16 forward to continuing to proactively serving the
17 greater community at large. Thank you very much.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. The next
20 witness is Leonard Williams.

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You're good, Lenny.

23 LEONARD WILLIAMS: Thank you for allowing
24 me to come before the committee and speak. I've
25 sitting here since 10 o'clock and I heard

1
2 Commissioner Hendon and you, Councilman Holden, hit
3 on mostly everything that I was going to-- I wrote
4 down and I put everything on paper. And I'd love to
5 start off. My name is Leonard Williams. I'm
6 currently the President of the Vietnam Veterans of
7 America Chapter number 32 in Maspeth, Queens,
8 Councilman Holden's district. And you know, I'll
9 just start off by saying that the government should
10 take care of all veterans. I am a Vietnam veteran,
11 and you know, back then they missed us. You know, it
12 took a long time. As a matter of fact, the maybe
13 five years I started getting active with the Vietnam
14 veterans and any services. And what was said before
15 is where they didn't have anything for us at the
16 time. You know, there was nothing. I came-- I got out
17 of the service. I returned around said, okay, life
18 goes on. It was amazing. You know, I was in Vietnam
19 one day and then I was in New York City at the
20 nearest bar three days later, you know, and life went
21 on. Welcome home. Life went on. What are you going
22 to be doing? And they didn't have any services for
23 us at that time. Recently now, as I said, I'm a very
24 active with Councilman Holden and the Vietnam
25 Veterans of America, and commissioner Hendon. And

1 just a couple of things. You know, you reach down to
2 the mental health services. I ran into-- I want to
3 quickly talk about with that. I've met-- I've brought
4 up people, guys that wanted to suffer from PTSD.
5 These are Iraq/Afghanistan, the younger generation of
6 the, you know, maybe the 25-30 year old, and they
7 don't want to come forward. a lot of them are police
8 officers, fire Department personal, so on and so
9 forth, and they don't-- they cannot come out and--
10 more or less come out as they are, because they're
11 worried about going into the rubber gun squad or
12 something like that.

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you. Time is
15 expired.

16 LEONARD WILLIAMS: That they will not--
17 they will not, you know, be able to do their
18 services, so they refrain and they just keep on going
19 on. I've reached out to, you know, numerous veteran-
20 strict [sic] shelters, Borden Avenue, homeless
21 shelter at St. Albans veteran nursing home, and I
22 noticed we need-- the biggest thing I as listening
23 today is you need veteran's veteran services. Like,
24 Commissioner Hendon is a veteran and I think he
25 perfectly understands what other veterans go through.

1
2 Outsiders don't realize, you know, what we went
3 through, even for basic training, Cold War veterans
4 or whatever. We just-- we have our whole community.
5 We are our own community, and we need that-- we need,
6 like you say, in the mental health issues or the
7 partnership of a bunch of-- you know, with all other
8 veterans' organizations. A lot of things the
9 America-- I reached out to the American Legion 1424
10 capture, and I didn't get back, they never got back
11 to me. The VFW over there in Maspeth, I've heard of
12 her, but what we have to do, we have to bring this
13 together. We have to bring these in, organizations
14 together. hopefully what you can do Councilman
15 Holden is instead of having individuals-- I speak to
16 you a lot, and you know, we do a lot Together but I
17 don't talk-- I don't' hear from the Manhattan organ--
18 Manhattan DVA. I don't hear from the American
19 Legion. I think we have to have a forum, a day on a
20 calendar to bring us all in, and then you're out--
21 out office or the cloud chat. Need it a polish
22 America league-- and all sit down and understand
23 what's going on. You know, there's so much going on
24 as Commissioner Hendon turned around and said, we're
25 reaching out for funding. We're doing this and the

1
2 VSO organizations. You know, we rent. We need more
3 funding for rent and all of that. I-- We could do
4 much more with the Borden Avenue shelter and the St.
5 Albans Nursing home which we do a lot with now, and
6 we could do a hell of a lot more, but the funding
7 isn't quite there for us. You know, we have
8 operating expenses. We pay rent. We cater for what
9 our own office or meeting hall. We don't have the
10 monies to pay the rent for that. So we share with
11 the Polish American League organization over in
12 Maspeth, and in Maspeth themselves-- and if we didn't
13 go join them, they were about to, you know, lock the
14 doors also. So the funding is big. You know, I don't
15 know where we can come with that, but the mental
16 health issues, yes-- the housing, definitely the
17 housing, you know, is huge, and I-- the biggest thing
18 before I'll close is where you're talking about how
19 do we reach out to these veterans, you know, in New
20 York. And I think maybe we should have like a
21 registrar of where ET-- I was going to ETS which only
22 military knows what that is. It's when you get out
23 of the service, there should be a place that you
24 could reach out and get the name, get the ID, get the
25 address of that individual and welcome them home,

1
2 welcome them home and still build a relationship from
3 there. I myself, I deal with St. Albans Hospital and
4 I've been down in Brooklyn by Fort Hamilton and I
5 find their medical and their professionals, the
6 nurses, the doctors, I find them excellent. I have
7 no problem whatsoever. I don't wait long times. I
8 make an appointment. I walk right in. It's
9 fantastic, and a lot of veterans, a lot of guys-- I
10 had one guy, another Vietnam veteran era, he asked
11 me, "Len, how do you get along with the Brooklyn
12 Hospital?" I said great. I said I have no problem
13 whatsoever. So it's unbeknownst to a lot of people
14 how far we came along, and I say we, only since I've
15 been active since the last five years, and that's
16 probably thanking Commissioner Hendon and Councilman
17 Holden and all the other veteran representatives.
18 But that's about-- I'm just saying I think we need a
19 forum instead of this Zoom meetings. Have a get-
20 together. We'll invite the other chapters. We'll
21 invite the American Legion and the young, you know,
22 the Iraq/Afghanistan, because we're all hurt. I
23 myself, I suffer from survivor's guilt, and you know,
24 it only came to pass since I started getting active
25 again. My life went on. After Vietnam, my life went

1 on. I got busy, and then only recently talking to,
2 you know, to Councilman Holden and the other Vietnam
3 veterans, amongst ourselves I'm allow-- I can open
4 up. Amongst strangers, I will not. I really, really
5 won't, you know. And it's just basic life. You
6 know, that's it for me. I'd [inaudible] give me that
7 extra time of talking, but we do have to have more
8 funding, and there has to do more to do for Borden
9 Avenue to St. Albans and all the other VSO aid
10 organizations as you say, veterans services. Thank
11 you for-- I don't' want to ramble anymore, but I had
12 it all written down, and I know I missed some stuff,
13 but thank you very much. We definitely need more
14 funding.
15

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, I think you got
17 every--

18 LEONARD WILLIAMS: [interposing]
19 [inaudible]

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You got everything,
21 Len. Very good. Thank you. You got everything.

22 LEONARD WILLIAMS: Thanks, Bob.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Again, thank you for
24 your leadership on Vietnam Vets Chapter 32 and all
25 your help on the coat drive at Borden. You were

1
2 amazing on that. you helped transport all those
3 hundreds of coats that we brought over, and certainly
4 supplied some of the coats, and many other projects
5 that you do all over the City. So we thank you.
6 Thank you, Len Williams.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Our next
8 witness is Laurie Sutton.

9 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

10 LAURIE SUTTON: thank you so much. Can
11 everyone hear me?

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes, yes.

13 LAURIE SUTTON: Terrific. Chair Holden,
14 other members of the Committee on Veterans,
15 Commissioner Hendon and all of us who are gathered
16 today to address these important issues. First of
17 all, Chair Holden, I just want to echo and share your
18 sentiment concerning the loss of Deputy Commissioner
19 and former City Council Member Paul Vallone. Yes,
20 his optimism, his inspiration is an example, will
21 continue to be felt for years to come. This morning,
22 I just want-- or this afternoon, I just have a couple
23 of things I'd like to address. One on veteran's
24 homelessness and one on PTSD. First, on veteran
25 homelessness. I was recently appointed to serve as

1 Vice Chair of the Veterans Community and Outreach and
2 Engagement Board in West LA to address their
3 challenges with the veteran homelessness, community
4 services, and linking it into the broader community.
5 They were aware of our track record here in New York
6 City, and I was able to point them to the recent
7 report. The New York State Comptroller, last
8 November, published a report on homelessness among
9 New York's veterans and specifically called out the
10 City for their outsized impact that had to do with a
11 lot of the folks that are in that room right now and
12 across the City, and I just wanted to just make the
13 point, chair Holden, that you know, achieving those
14 impacts required resources, absolutely, and also peer
15 support. Partnership, so vital. The programs, yes,
16 that the Commissioner outlined, and the presence
17 whether it be face-to-face wherever possible or in-
18 person. And as we go forward, New York City will
19 continue to stand out as a leader among leaders.

20 Just listening to Commissioner Hendon, I'm so proud--

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: [interposing] Time is
22 expired.
23

24 LAURIE SUTTON: to hear of all that's
25 going on, will continue to evolve or development as

1 the Department of Veterans Services lives up to the
2 vision held by so many generations of veterans,
3 family members, elected officials, and advocates.
4 Secondly, PTSD, thank you so much, Commissioner--
5 pardon me. Thank you so much, Chair Holden, for your
6 leadership and advocacy in bringing tighter a joint
7 committee hearing last September with Chair Lee and
8 the Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities and
9 Addictions. I'd just like to-- I won't repeat. I
10 testified at length last September, but I just want
11 to add one point of clarification now regarding
12 something that came up earlier this session and that
13 has to do with lifetime prevalence of PTSD. Yes, the
14 lifetime prevalence on average for veterans ranges
15 between seven and eight percent. But of course, the
16 veterans that we encounter and that we deal with, and
17 the DVS is doing such a masterful job in reaching out
18 to and supporting through their various programs and
19 partnerships-- they're individual veterans and they
20 belong to subgroups of the veteran population which
21 hold distinctly different rates of lifetime
22 prevalence. So, for example, in a 2022 study that
23 was recently published in the Journal of Clinical
24 Psychiatry, this really aimed at the national health
25

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2 and resilience in veterans studied. It found that
3 the range of lifetime prevalence ranged from seven
4 percent to 32 percent. And you know, for women
5 veterans, 19 percent; Vietnam veterans, 23 percent;
6 post 9/11 veterans, 15-20 percent; 21 to 29-year-old
7 veterans, 24 percent; and among our LGBTQ+
8 colleagues, over 30 percent. so I hope those numbers
9 help to sort of humanize and to express the variation
10 among our entire population of veterans, our
11 community of veterans, and to understand that within
12 certain subgroups, sub communities, the young women,
13 post 9/11, LGBTQ+ there's considerable variation, and
14 we've got to reach out and connect. And thank you
15 again, Chair Holden, for your support for RTM as one
16 of the break-through treatments that really can
17 continue to make a difference. With that, I'd be
18 happy to address any comments or questions. Thank
19 you, Chair Holden.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, thank you
21 General Sutton and by the way, thank you for actually
22 exposing at least on a hearing but also on a Zoom,
23 RTM, that you actually told me about it and how
24 successful it is. so that's why we're doing some--
25 we're going to do some pilot programs thanks to you,

1
2 and thanks to all your wonderful work with our
3 veterans over the years, from being the Commissioner
4 of DVS to doing all the things you're doing now
5 across the country. So again, I want to thank you
6 for your leadership on behalf of our veterans.

7 LAURIE SUTTON: Takes a team.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Anybody else?

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, General.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. And I
12 believe we now have Edward Schloeman.

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

14 EDWARD SCHLOEMAN: I'm here.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, great.

16 EDWARD SCHLOEMAN: Okay, you guys, you
17 have to unmute me, I think.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You are. You are.
19 We got you. Go ahead.

20 EDWARD SCHLOEMAN: I have no video. Okay.
21 No video, that's okay. I'm retired Chief Master
22 Sergeant Ed Schloeman, Chairman of Operation Warrior
23 Shield, and I thank you once again for the
24 opportunity to discuss our work with mental health
25 and the veteran community. I have been involved with

1 this work since 2010, and I'm very proud of the
2 partnerships which we have with many city
3 organizations. We have endorsed and implemented
4 transcendental meditation, or TM, with the
5 partnership with the David Lynch Foundation,
6 Operation K9 Companion with the partnership from the
7 Doris Day Animal Foundation, and today, as I
8 presented in our last Council meeting six months ago,
9 I am proud to say we are supporting another mental
10 health initiative called, as you all know, RTM. Both
11 General Sutton and I are working together on this
12 initiative and I sent the package to the City Council
13 and to you, too, Council Member and Chair Holden,
14 outlining the program which we call Project Gotham
15 Grip. Operation Warrior Shield has submitted a grant
16 request to implement this program, and we have
17 already have much interest form NYPD Health and
18 Wellness Section and other veterans service
19 organizations. Why NYPD? They have over 3,000
20 active duty reservists in the military today, and
21 many have seen combat, and I am very honored to
22 present RTM to the Police Academy on April 10th, and
23 joining me, of course, is General Sutton and I hope
24 that you can come too. With the city grant I
25

1
2 presented in the New York City Discretionary Funding,
3 we need this support in this battle against PTSD.
4 That concludes my presentation.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Ed, and
6 again, thank you for your wonderful at RTM, and also
7 your work with our veterans. You're well-known
8 throughout-- and I'm glad we were able to unmute you
9 finally, but we still have a nice picture of you on
10 our screen here at least. We can look at that.
11 Thanks again for your work.

12 EDWARD SCHLOEMAN: Thank you back.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I would like to call
14 one last time anyone who may be on Zoom who had
15 registered including Vishal Balani [sp?], Dequincy
16 Bowen, Rabah Bel Kabir [sp?], and Crystal Brockington
17 [sp?]. Anyone there?

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, last call.
19 That's it. Thank you everyone for your testimony,
20 and Commissioner Hendon is still here as usual. We
21 thank you for that. One of the only Commissioners to
22 stay throughout all the hearings, and thank you to my
23 colleagues who also stayed, the Common Sense Caucus.
24 Thank you so much. Thank you everyone. I think it
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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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was a great hearing, and we'll see you at the next hearing next week. Thank you.

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C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date May 1, 2024