

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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B E F O R E:

ERIC A. ULRICH
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Paul A. Vallone
Andrew Cohen
Alan N. Maisel
Fernando Cabrera

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

Loree Sutton (Ret. General)
Commissioner
NYC Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs

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Manager
Military Discharge Upgrade Clinic
Veteran Advocacy Project
Urban Justice Center

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Vice President
Integrated Policy and Program Solutions
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Paul Schottenhamel
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Executive Director
UWVC & NYC Veterans Day Parade
On behalf of Vincent McGowan
Chairman
Veterans Advisory Board

Linda Crowley
Member
Military Families Speak Out

Joseph Graham
President
Vietnam Veterans of America
Manhattan, Chapter 126

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you very much.

[gavel] Good afternoon. I am Council Member Eric Ulrich, chair of the Council's Committee on Veterans. We are joined by my colleagues on my right, Council Members Paul Vallone of Queens and Andrew Cohen of the Bronx.

In June, this committee held an oversight hearing where we examined the role of MOVA, Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs in serving the nearly 210,000 veterans who reside in the city of New York. We heard from then Commissioner Terrance Holliday about MOVA's work on issues such as Benefits Counselors Initiative, military burials, employment, housing, homelessness and the Veterans Treatment Courts. Despite MOVA's good work, the office remains seriously underfunded and is understaffed to meet the needs of not only veterans living in the city now, but those who will be returning from active duty over the next few years.

MOVA currently has only five full-time staff members and two New York City Civic Corps members. The office has three benefits counselors funded through the Robin Hood Grant program, but

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2 unfortunately, funding for this additional staff
3 expired in July.

4 This afternoon we are here to review and
5 consider Intro 314, which would establish a
6 Department of Veterans Affairs for the city, thereby
7 permitting greater resources to flow to the service
8 men and women who bravely defend our country, yet who
9 tragically too often struggle with financial, medical
10 and psychological issues upon their return and
11 transition back into civilian life. Elevating MOVA
12 to a full city agency would allow the Council to hold
13 preliminary and executive budget hearings, as well as
14 us to directly administer contracts to providers to
15 veteran service organizations that serve veterans,
16 eliminating the current, often frustrating process
17 where organizations the Council funds must work with
18 agencies such as DYCD, who really have no connection
19 with or understanding of the needs of veterans or
20 DFTA or SBS or others. In a city that has so often
21 been at the forefront of caring for the vulnerable
22 members of our society, it is vital that New York be
23 a leader in honoring those who serve and making a
24 strong commitment to its veterans.

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2 I want to thank the members of this
3 committee, especially members Vallone, Rosenthal and
4 Rodriguez, who have signed onto the bill as co-
5 sponsors and before we get started with the first
6 panel, we do want to welcome the newly appointed...
7 the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans
8 Affairs will be testifying first today. Retired
9 General Loree Sutton, let me welcome you, express my
10 gratitude to you for all of the work you've done and
11 of course, for your service to our country and we
12 really look forward to working with you to address
13 the needs of our veterans. I think that Mayor de
14 Blasio could not have picked a better person to lead
15 this agency moving forward and I'm delighted that
16 you're here to testify at today's hearing. Thank you
17 very much. [off mic] Just push the little red
18 button. You're good to go. You're on.

19 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Good to go? Thank
20 you so much, Mr. Chairman and good morning. Good
21 morning, Chairman Ulrich and the members of the New
22 York City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is
23 Loree Sutton and I am honored to serve as the
24 Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans
25 Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with

1
2 you today and address Introduction Number 314 in
3 relation to the establishment of a Department of
4 Veterans Affairs and repealing section 14 of chapter
5 one of the New York Charter and subchapter 3 of
6 chapter one of title 3 of the administrative code of
7 the city of New York.

8 Let me start out by sharing some of my
9 background. Privileged to serve nearly 30 years in
10 the United Army, I was the Army's highest ranking
11 psychiatrist from 2007 to 2010, and was the founding
12 director of the Defense Centers of Excellence for
13 Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. My
14 military awards and decorations include the Legion of
15 Merit and the Bronze Star. I have led change in
16 complex organizations throughout my time in uniform
17 and I'm a team player, strategic thinker, problem
18 solver, innovator and advocate. Since retiring from
19 active duty service in November 2010, I have worked
20 with numerous organizations throughout the country
21 and around the world to advance peer-to-peer training
22 using self-regulation skills. One of my proudest
23 achievements is working with New York Senator U.S.
24 Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and others on behalf of
25 the all too many men and women who have endured the

1
2 agony of workplace bullying, mobbing and military
3 sexual trauma.

4 On August 18, 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio
5 appointed me as Commissioner to his Office of
6 Veterans Affairs. Since assuming the role of
7 Commissioner early this month, the 1st of September,
8 I am in the midst of conducting a 90-day assessment
9 of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, known as
10 MOVA, examining its current role, mission,
11 organization and functions to determine what actions
12 are necessary to achieve the greatest positive impact
13 for all New York City veterans and their loved ones.
14 During this initial period, I am also listening to
15 and engaging the perspectives from a diverse range of
16 stakeholders throughout the city, including leaders
17 from City Hall; City Council; state and federal
18 agencies; private; academic; philanthropic; social;
19 non-profit sectors and most importantly, veterans and
20 their families from all generations, all components,
21 active, reserve and National Guard and throughout the
22 five boroughs. Upon completing this assessment, I
23 will propose strategic recommendations for the Mayor
24 to consider as he formulates his vision and strategy
25 with respect to veterans affairs. The bedrock values

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2 underpinning this endeavor are honor, engagement,
3 accountability, respect and team work. The Mayor's
4 commitment to our city's veterans is deeply personal
5 and heartfelt. As he has stated, "It's a crucial
6 time for new leadership in this office because the
7 needs are great and more complicated than ever."

8 Chairman Ulrich, I want to close by
9 thanking you for your leadership. I appreciate your
10 tireless commitment to veterans and their families
11 and applaud your penchant for meaningful action.
12 Today's hearing promises to provide vital insights in
13 forming my 90-day assessment of MOVA operations.
14 Introduction 314 deserves all due consideration as we
15 dedicate ourselves to the historic journey that lies
16 ahead. Much has been done; much remains to be done
17 and in this I am indebted to former Commissioner
18 Terrance Holliday and all of the MOVA commissioners
19 before him, as well as the MOVA team members. I look
20 forward... I look forward to following up with the
21 New York City Council Committee on Veterans to
22 discuss this important proposal in further detail. I
23 share your sense of urgency. My team and I are
24 currently overhauling the MOVA website to enhance its
25 functions and access to relevant resources, including

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2 agency liaisons and job opportunities. Further, we
3 are examining the contracting process to identify how
4 to best maximize effectiveness and efficiency, as
5 well as to exercise due diligence to ensure fairness
6 and accountability. This is not business as usual.
7 Together we will move mountains.

8 Thank you for this opportunity to meet
9 with you today. I look forward to working with all
10 of you on behalf of all New York City veterans and
11 their families. At this time, I welcome your
12 comments and questions. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you,
14 Commissioner. We've been joined by my colleague from
15 Brooklyn, your home borough now, Council Member Alan
16 Maisel to my far right, not politically, of course,
17 but just in terms of [laughter] his seating position
18 today, but thank you, Alan. Do any of my colleagues
19 have any questions for the new commissioner or would
20 like to go on the record? Council Member Vallone?

21 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Well, it's not
22 good morning, so good afternoon, General.

23 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Good afternoon.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Again, I share
25 the Chair's sentiments on your honor and congratulate

1
2 you on your position and we look forward to working
3 with you and I guess since you're going through the
4 90-day assessment, I guess today's a little premature
5 to ask you on what your stance is going to be here
6 on...

7 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] Today
8 is day number 29.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Day number 29,
10 okay.

11 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Yes, sir.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Well, we're all
13 very excited about moving this forward and hope to
14 see this through the Council that's under Eric's
15 leadership pushing this and we'd like to see this
16 happen, so we'd love to hear your thoughts on this so
17 we can expand and finally have an agency dedicated to
18 our veterans.

19 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Thank you.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Any other
22 colleagues? Helen, Andy? She does live in Brooklyn,
23 you know. [background voice] Okay.

24 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: I live on 111 Lord
25 [phonetic] Street right close to MetroTech. Too far

1 away? Okay, alright, but I look forward to...
2 actually this last weekend Councilman Malev... is
3 that... I'm sorry, let me make sure I've got your...

4 [crosstalk]

5 COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: No.

6 [crosstalk]

7 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Your...

8 [crosstalk]

9 COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: Maisel.

10 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Maisel, but...

11 COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: Yeah.

12 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Councilman Maisel.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: [interposing] You
14 can call me anything you want. Just don't call me
15 late to lunch.

16 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Okay, that's a
17 deal, but had a chance to go to Fort Hamilton to the
18 Retiree Appreciation Day and it was just a wonderful
19 experience actually. There were advocates, veterans
20 of all generation, family members, agencies from not
21 only Brooklyn, but all five boroughs.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: Yeah, but now we
23 have to get you to move east towards Kings Plaza.
24
25

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2 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Okay, you can work
3 on me on that one, okay?

4 COUNCIL MEMBER MAISEL: Yeah.

5 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Deal. Thank you
6 very much.

7 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: The Commissioner has
8 made herself available to any of my colleagues who
9 have veterans events in their district. As a matter
10 of fact, she's coming to a Town Hall in October.
11 What's the date, Redmond? October... I'm sponsoring
12 a Veterans Town Hall in Queens in my district at an
13 American Legion Post in Woodhaven on October 15th and
14 Commissioner Sutton is scheduled to attend. That's
15 myself and Assemblyman Mike Miller, but there are so
16 many events going on around the city throughout the
17 year, but I know that she wants to be a very visible
18 and active presence at all of those, as many as she
19 possibly can, but she is new and we have to give her
20 a little time to settle into the job, but she wants
21 to listen, she wants to learn and she wants to lead
22 and as I stated before, I don't think Mayor de Blasio
23 could've picked a better person. So I know you're
24 very busy, but I do appreciate you coming today.
25 Thank you, General, thank you.

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2 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Thank you so much,
3 Mr. Chairman.

4 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Okay.

5 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: I appreciate the
6 interest and input, not only of the committee, but
7 everyone who's here today. I'm all ears, I'm
8 listening and I look forward to learning from each of
9 you. Thank you very much.

10 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you again.
11 The first panel that we have... let's get them up
12 here and sworn in. We have Robert Peter Cuthbert,
13 Junior from the Urban Justice Center. We have Kim
14 Williams from Veterans Mental Health Association
15 Action Committee. We have Paul Schottenhamel.
16 Practicing my German; I'm going to get it right and
17 we have Patrick... the handwriting is a little...
18 [background voices] Alright, very good. [background
19 voice] From SAGE. Patrick from SAGE. Wrong Patrick,
20 sorry. Oh, Acheson, sorry, okay. I couldn't read
21 the handwriting. I'll ask the clerk to swear in
22 the... or the Committee Counsel rather to swear in
23 the panel.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: This is Eric
25 Bernstein, Committee Counsel. Will the members of

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2 the panel please raise their right hand? Do you
3 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing
4 but the truth in your testimony before this committee
5 and to respond honestly to council member questions?

6 ALL PANELISTS: I do.

7 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Okay, please
8 proceed. We'll start with the gentleman on the left.
9 Who's... who's left? Their left. My left.

10 ROBERT CUTHBERT: Okay, good afternoon.
11 Thanks. Good afternoon, Chairman Ulrich, Councilman
12 Maisel, Councilman Cohen, Councilman Vallone. My
13 name is Rob Cuthbert and I manage the Discharge
14 Upgrade Clinic of the Veteran Advocacy Project at the
15 Urban Justice Center. Our director, Coco Colhane,
16 was invited to speak today, but is unfortunately out
17 of town, so I'm speaking on her behalf and on behalf
18 of our project.

19 Since the end of the Revolutionary War,
20 veterans have been a permanent feature of New York
21 City, yet it was not until 1987, 13 years after the
22 end of the Vietnam War, that Local Law 53 created the
23 Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs. Now, 14 years
24 later, after 9/11, the Veteran Advocacy Project
25 supports the creation of a New York City Department

1 of Veterans Affairs. The department would be a
2 valuable resource to support the approximately
3 237,000 veterans living in New York City and the
4 thousands that will join them in the future.
5 However, the proposed law allows for dramatic change,
6 but does not ensure it. The City Council must ensure
7 a Department of Veterans Affairs for our city that is
8 more robust and has the potential to effect dramatic
9 and positive change for New York City's veterans.
10 New York City must have an agency for veterans that
11 leads; a department that organizes and focuses
12 veteran services and unfortunately, the proposed law
13 does not provide enough details on the duties of a
14 new department. Without a clear mission, the
15 department could do little to improve the lives of
16 New York City's veterans.

17
18 New York City's veteran services suffer
19 from a lack of focus and collaboration. In some
20 areas, such as behavioral health, housing and
21 military discharge upgrades, there is a critical need
22 for services. Many of the city's programs limit
23 which veterans can receive assistance. The Veterans
24 Advocacy Project believes that this department should
25 have the mission of supporting every veteran,

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2 regardless of active or reserve status, service era,
3 disability or the characterization of their
4 discharge.

5 A Department of Veterans Affairs should
6 continue MOVA's attention to employment, but the
7 proposed department must organize around four other
8 pillars as well: health, legal services, housing and
9 education. Health: The New York City department of
10 Veterans Affairs must ensure that every veteran is
11 connected to VA or other health care that heals the
12 wounds of war. Currently, not every veteran is
13 entitled to VA care. For example, some New York
14 members of the National Guard do not need the VA
15 service requirements for care and statutorily are not
16 even considered veterans by the VA. Other veterans
17 received administrative discharges for minor offenses
18 that they committed while suffering from Post-
19 Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury or from the
20 effects of military rape and sexual assault and they
21 don't qualify for VA medical care. The New York City
22 Department of Veterans Affairs should help organize
23 pathways to health care inside or outside the VA for
24 every veteran who needs it with an exigent focus on
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2 veterans who are suicidal and seeking counseling or
3 other mental health services.

4 Legal services: The New York City
5 Department of Veterans Affairs must connect veterans
6 with legal services that can help them navigate the
7 veteran-specific legal structures that require
8 representation for success. Attorneys can remove
9 barriers to employment, secure housing and more.
10 Disability claims before the VA and discharge
11 upgrades before the Department of Defense are the
12 areas that require skilled advocates with special
13 training. There are also veterans who need veteran-
14 specific counsel in housing cases, criminal cases and
15 in public benefits hearings. Too few of our city's
16 providers know how the VA benefit system interacts
17 with other government entitlements, and almost none
18 know how the military discharge upgrade system works.
19 As a result of deficient applications and
20 insufficient advocacy, New York City's veterans lose
21 access to thousands, if not millions, of federal
22 dollars to which they are entitled.

23 Housing: The New York City Department of
24 Veterans Affairs must commit to the United States
25 Department of Veterans Affairs' current goal of

1 ending homelessness among veterans by 2015. The
2 expanded HUD-VASH program provides housing solutions
3 for many New York veterans; however, in veteran
4 supportive housing far too often we find caseworkers
5 who are overworked and untrained, which puts veterans
6 in a cycle of eviction and homelessness. The
7 department should examine the conditions of
8 facilities that receive funding through the city,
9 some of which are barely a step above shelter. The
10 department should review veteran supportive housing
11 programs through an annual report and have the
12 ability to effect change for veterans who are not
13 being housed properly. The New York City Department
14 of Veterans Affairs must help connect veterans to
15 better housing and advocate for policies that make
16 veterans a priority in all types of housing
17 developments.

19 Education: The New York City Department
20 of Veterans Affairs must provide veterans with two
21 kinds of educational guidance. First, it must guide
22 veterans towards concrete pathways to a vocational
23 skill or to enrollment in the CUNY or SUNY systems.
24 Veterans must be connected with proven, non-predatory
25 education systems. Second, it must connect veterans

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2 with the resources to address the most common
3 barriers to education. Student veterans face too
4 many challenges that may cause destabilization and
5 ultimately force them to sacrifice education for
6 survival. VA benefits adjudication, family law
7 issues, housing issues and military discharge
8 upgrades and more can derail veterans at a crucial
9 time in their lives. At these critical junctures,
10 student veterans need to be guided towards legal and
11 health support.

12 In addition to organizing around these
13 four pillars, the law should mandate that the annual
14 report provided by the Veterans Advisory Board should
15 meet specific content requirements and answer certain
16 questions, such as, according to the Veterans
17 Advisory Board, what is the state of New York City's
18 veterans' population? As is the annual report to the
19 Veteran Advocacy Board are in actuality only minutes
20 of the meetings that provide little to no policy
21 guidance to the public, veterans advocacy groups or
22 New York City's government. New York City must have
23 a Department of Veterans Affairs, but the mission of
24 this department must be to organize and focus
25 services across New York City that address not only

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2 employment, but health, legal services, housing and
3 education. The proposed law allows for dramatic
4 change, but does not ensure it.

5 The City Council must pass a law that
6 creates a Department of Veterans Affairs for our city
7 that is more robust and has the potential to effect
8 dramatic and positive change for New York City
9 veterans. Although employment is a vital area of
10 focus, health, legal services, housing and education
11 should be specifically cited in the law that will
12 create New York City's Department of Veterans
13 Affairs. In time, our department should seize the
14 opportunity to set a national example for the best
15 care and reintegration of our veterans, and to echo
16 Commissioner Sutton, it is an opportunity to move
17 mountains. Thank you for the opportunity to speak
18 today. I appreciate it and I'm open to any questions
19 by [chime] Chairman Ulrich or the other members of
20 the committee.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Mr.
22 Cuthbert. We'll save questions until the panel has
23 completed. I'll ask my colleagues to write them
24 down. We've been joined by Council Member Cabrera of
25 the Bronx, and now we will hear from Kim Williams.

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2 KIMBERLY WILLIAMS: Good afternoon, Chair
3 Ulrich and members of the committee. Thank you for
4 your leadership in addressing the needs of New York
5 City's veterans and for organizing this important
6 hearing on elevating the Mayor's Office of Veterans
7 Affairs to departmental level. My name is Kimberly
8 Williams. I am the vice president for integrated
9 Policy and Program Solutions with the Mental Health
10 Association of New York City. I am speaking today on
11 behalf of the Veterans Mental Health Action Committee
12 of the Veterans Mental Health Coalition of New York
13 City.

14 The coalition, which has a diverse cross-
15 membership of over 1,000 stakeholders and was co-
16 founded by MHA-NYC and NAMI New York City Metro,
17 promotes the mental health and well-being of New York
18 City's service members, veterans and their families
19 through education, information, collaboration and
20 promotion of comprehensive array of services. The
21 Veterans Mental Health Action Committee was
22 established as a subcommittee to promote needed
23 policy reforms at the local and state levels.

24 Over 2,000 military veterans, most of
25 whom have served in previous generations, are

1 residents of this great city. As more service
2 members transition back to civilian life, this number
3 will increase by the thousands and will require
4 additional resources in dollars and staffing to meet
5 both the current and growing need. A range of
6 coordinated services from all levels of government,
7 the private sector and local community-based
8 providers is required for veterans and their families
9 to successfully transition home and thrive throughout
10 their lives.
11

12 In New York City, MOVA is the lead
13 government body addressing veterans' needs, including
14 advising the Mayor on issues impacting veterans and
15 coordinating with other veteran serving organizations
16 and key stakeholders to support the city's veterans
17 community. While MOVA has a vital leadership role in
18 confronting the needs of the city's veterans, it has
19 lacked the funding, resources and staffing to fully
20 operationalize its mission. In order for New York
21 City to fully support and commit to addressing the
22 needs of all veterans, it must do more. That is why
23 the Veterans Mental Health Action Committee lends its
24 support for the recent proposed city legislation that
25 calls for MOVA to be elevated to the level of New

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2 York City Department of Veterans Affairs. With a
3 department dedicated to serving veterans, greater
4 resources and funding can be secured to better
5 overcome the complex and diverse needs of veterans
6 from all generations, backgrounds and experiences.
7 Similar to the role of other local departments, the
8 Veterans Department could be responsible for veteran
9 services in New York City, overseeing funding for
10 services and supports, contracting with local
11 providers to deliver services to veterans, ensuring
12 quality care and engaging in sound planning on behalf
13 of the veteran's community.

14 Furthermore, New York City government
15 leadership representing veterans, whether MOVA or a
16 department, would do well to raise the profile of New
17 York City's veterans. This includes increasing
18 awareness about their challenges, needs, as well as
19 strengths and skills to the general public, fellow
20 government partners and the private sector so that
21 necessary resources and supports can be mounted,
22 effectively coordinated and sustained.

23 Most importantly, whether the leadership
24 lies within the Mayor's office or a local department,
25 the city's veterans and their unique needs deserve

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2 greater attention, planning and most importantly,
3 funding. With all the resources we have in this
4 great city, we can and we must do more to better meet
5 the challenges of our fellow citizens who have
6 sacrificed so selflessly and often at great cost on
7 their behalf.

8 We believe this is a significant time of
9 transition for MOVA. We are excited about the new
10 leadership; in fact, we are excited about new
11 leadership within all branches of government and with
12 it, there is renewed there is renewed opportunity for
13 New York City to make good on its commitment to the
14 city's veterans community. We thank you for the
15 opportunity to testify today and for your
16 consideration of how to maximize and elevate this
17 important office, and please reach out to us for
18 background information on the needs of New York
19 City's veterans and particularly their needs as they
20 relate to behavioral health challenges. Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Miss
22 Williams. Let's hear from Paul Schottenhamel.

23 PAUL SCHOTTENHAMEL: Thank you. I'm Paul
24 Schottenhamel. I am the adjutant for Queens County

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2 American Legion and the commander of the Joseph B.
3 Garity Post in Glendale.

4 First of all, we'd like to say that
5 the... under the past commissioner, MOVA has put
6 itself on the map from the past where MOVA was
7 basically a non-entity for many years and it reached
8 out to the veteran community. We're hoping that this
9 law will basically move it out from under the Mayor's
10 office and make it a full department. It will be of
11 a great advantage to be able to continue to expand
12 those services. We basically see that the major
13 point that we gained on this is that the funding will
14 be easier to get out to the veteran community to help
15 support us so we don't have to put grants up through
16 the Office of Child Services, which makes absolutely
17 no sense when they start asking us why... you know
18 what we're going to do with our children. So that's
19 the major thing in Queens County that we've looked at
20 as far as this introduction and we'd like to say that
21 at this point we do support it. We understand that
22 the Charter of the City Council is sort of like the
23 Constitution, and other laws and funding will be
24 generated from the Council in order to expand the
25 services of MOVA, and I basically support the

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2 statements of my predecessors here because they
3 basically said everything that the American Legion is
4 looking for. Thank you very much.

5 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Okay, thank you,
6 Paul. Let's hear from Patrick and then we'll go to
7 questions.

8 PATRICK ACHESON: Hello, Chairman Ulrich
9 and members of the Veterans Affairs Committee. On
10 behalf of SAGE, Services and Advocacy for GLBT
11 Elders, I would like to thank you for holding this
12 hearing on the establishment of a Department of
13 Veterans Affairs. My name is Patrick Acheson and I
14 am chief of staff at SAGE, as well as the proud
15 husband of an LGBT veteran.

16 SAGE is the country's oldest and largest
17 organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT
18 older adults and has provided comprehensive social
19 service and community building programs, including
20 the nation's first full-time LGBT Senior Center
21 located in Midtown for more than 30 years. New York
22 is home to approximately 1 million men and women who
23 served their country in the Armed Forces. It is
24 estimated that 37,757 gay and lesbian veterans live
25 in New York State and 17,000 live in New York City

1
2 alone. When ranked by the number in per capita rate
3 of gay and lesbian veterans, New York State and New
4 York City are among the top 10.

5 Across New York, more than 720,000
6 veterans are not receiving their health care benefits
7 from the VA. This is partly because the federal
8 bureaucracy fails to reach out and let our vets know
9 what services they are entitled to and partly because
10 navigating the complex benefits system offered by the
11 VA can be difficult for anyone. For LBGT vets,
12 especially those who are currently over the age of
13 60, however, there are additional barriers and
14 challenges, both to health care access within the VA
15 system, as well as to services to meet the needs
16 created by the fact of military service at a time
17 when discrimination against LGBT people was rampant
18 and a matter of official government policy.

19 SAGE believes that creating a Department
20 of Veterans Affairs will help the city be better
21 equipped to meet the full needs of its LGBT veterans.
22 Discrimination is at the root of many of the problems
23 specific to gay and lesbian veterans. Service
24 members who were forced to conceal their sexual
25 orientation experienced and continue to experience

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2 negative mental health effects related to
3 discrimination, as numerous studies have
4 demonstrated. Despite these consequences, few
5 resources are available for traumatized LGBT
6 veterans.

7 Further, VA research shows that the
8 strain from being stigmatized and the target of
9 bigoted hostility can produce high rates of smoking,
10 alcohol and drug abuse in LGBT vets, as well as a
11 greater risk of anxiety and depression. Recent
12 research indicates that only one-third of LGBT
13 veterans openly communicate about their sexual
14 orientation with VA health care providers and one-
15 quarter avoided seeking specific services because of
16 perceived stigma.

17 Transgender veterans are especially
18 reluctant to seek health care and many report
19 negative experiences with health care institutions.
20 24 percent of transgender veterans report being
21 refused medical treatment for being transgender and
22 43 percent say they have postponed or neglected to
23 seek medical care when they were sick for fear of
24 discrimination or maltreatment.

1
2 In addition, many LGBT older vets left
3 the military with a less than honorable discharge and
4 with discharge paperwork that noted either that they
5 were homosexual or that they were not fit for
6 military service or both. A less than honorable
7 discharge has lifelong consequences for a veteran,
8 limiting veterans' access to the GI Bill and Veterans
9 Administration health care. In addition, notations
10 of homosexuality or lack of fitness for military
11 service are a source of great stigma for many LGBT
12 elder veterans.

13 As a result of these discriminatory
14 circumstances, many LGBT elder veterans have not
15 accessed their federal VA and related benefits.
16 Instead, many rely on state public assistance
17 programs, shifting what should be a federal expense
18 to New York City and state. Other LGBT elder
19 veterans go without essential income, medical and
20 other support services, leading to impoverishment,
21 overreliance on emergency room visits and
22 hospitalization for medical care and homelessness.

23 Because SAGE provides New York City's
24 LGBT elder veterans with case management support,
25 benefits advocacy, access to legal counsel through a

1
2 partnership with the Legal Services for New York City
3 and enhanced wraparound services in order to improve
4 their overall well-being, we recognize the value of
5 the proposed Department of Veteran Affairs could
6 bring to those veterans most in need. We hope that
7 the Veteran Affairs Committee and other members of
8 the City Council will continue to support the LGBT
9 older adults, including our veterans in New York
10 City, who face severe challenges with income
11 insecurity and other basic quality of life issues as
12 they age. Your support continues to be greatly
13 valued and appreciated. Thank you for your time and
14 attention, Patrick Acheson, Chief of Staff, SAGE.

15 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Patrick
16 and thank you to all the people who signed up to
17 testify. I do want to make a point of information.
18 The clock is at five minutes for each speaker and
19 I'll ask my colleagues to keep their questions brief
20 so that we can get to as many people as quickly as we
21 can. I want to thank all of you. You've touched on
22 a lot of important points. I want to make note also
23 that October's hearing is going to be an oversight
24 hearing on reforming the Veterans Advisory Board.
25 November's hearing is on the topic of eliminating

1
2 veteran homelessness in the city and December's
3 hearing tentatively is regarding veterans procurement
4 study review and next steps, so I know that all of
5 you have touched on some of these topics and we are
6 talking about the bill today, which would elevate the
7 office, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs to a
8 full city agency and we heard about a lot of the
9 benefits besides the gravitas that it would afford
10 veterans, which was mentioned, the practicality of
11 making it easier to fund VSOs. The Council this
12 year, under the leadership of the Speaker and with
13 the help and support of my colleagues, we passed a
14 veterans initiative and put that into the budget,
15 \$400,000. It's the first veterans' initiative we've
16 had in five or at least six fiscal years, 'cause I've
17 been here for... this'll be my seventh, so and there
18 hasn't been one, but all of that money for legal
19 services going through NYLAG for job placement and
20 training programs that go through Helmets to Hardhats
21 for the New York City Mental Health Coalition, the
22 \$100,000 that they got. All of that money is going
23 through DYCD and they have to go through a maze of
24 bureaucracy the same way that the American Legion
25 Post in Queens might have to go through; the same way

1
2 that the Jewish war vets or the Catholic war vets or
3 the VFW posts or whichever organization you're
4 talking about. They are not able to communicate
5 effectively and in some cases, they're not able to
6 even get the money that they were allocated by an
7 elected official and that is a problem. Aside from
8 that, as I think the first speaker noted, the Council
9 has very little oversight over MOVA, especially
10 around budget time because it is an extension of the
11 Mayor's office essentially, so we do not have
12 jurisdiction over that the same way that we would
13 have oversight over the DOT or the Parks Department
14 or the Department of Cultural Affairs or what have
15 you. So there are a number of good intentions built
16 into this, but we're still working on this. I want
17 to get to Council Member Vallone and any other
18 colleagues before we move onto the next panel.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: I want to share
20 in our chair's comments. Thank you for I guess your
21 overwhelming support of this 'cause that's what my
22 summary would be, is that everyone's on the same
23 page. Robert, remind me never to be on the opposite
24 end of an argument involving one of your theses
25 'cause quite, quite helpful.

1
2 ROBERT CUTHBERT: [off mic] I apologize
3 for my ardor.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Well, it's
5 passion.

6 ROBERT CUTHBERT: [off mic] Yeah.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: It's passion and
8 the four pillars I found very helpful and I think you
9 outlined them well as to hopefully this happens to
10 how it can be molded into a successful agency. So
11 you know, we all appreciate when these comments and
12 ideas come to us 'cause this is where it shapes the
13 next steps, so I just wanted to say is there an
14 example on how... that you find is a working example
15 of this at this point in time in another municipality
16 or another area?

17 ROBERT CUTHBERT: I can't point to an
18 exemplary model, which is I think part of the
19 national problem when it comes to veterans services.
20 Not to say that there isn't one out there, but I'm
21 necessarily not aware of it. Most of my attention is
22 focused on turning New York City into that model. I
23 mean it should be a beacon for veterans; a place
24 where at post-service a veteran can not only receive
25 the benefits that they need to heal and to

1 reintegrate, but also start a new life. There is no
2 reason that an LBGT veteran at this point who
3 received a discharge for... on the basis of
4 homosexuality, not necessarily misconduct, should
5 have what they call on the street bad paper at this
6 point in time. Because of the repeal of "Don't ask,
7 don't tell," it's a fairly simple application, which
8 is not... and those veterans need outreach to do
9 those applications, because by law that has to happen
10 on an individual basis. Once "Don't ask, don't tell"
11 was repealed, there was no blanket upgrade for those
12 veterans. If a veteran received an undesirable
13 discharge, which is the equivalent of today's other
14 than honorable discharge, on the basis of
15 homosexuality then they are not receiving VA care;
16 they are not receiving the GI Bill and it gets more
17 complicated if we're talking about misconduct as a
18 narrative reason for discharge, which might've been
19 part of you know, the pressure of having to be in the
20 closet; being on the receiving end of profound
21 discrimination during that time in our military
22 history. In New York City, no veteran who suffered
23 under those circumstances or received that type of
24 discharge should be left without benefits, but they
25

1
2 need the support, and particularly the legal support
3 to do those applications. That's a place where New
4 York could take the lead. That should be a
5 commitment to New York's LBGT veterans population;
6 that if you have that paper for those reasons, we are
7 going to do what it takes to have the DOD receive
8 your application for an upgrade. Sorry to run
9 over...

10 [crosstalk]

11 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: No, but it
12 seems...

13 [crosstalk]

14 ROBERT CUTHBERT: But for time...

15 [crosstalk]

16 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: The lawyer side
17 of me...

18 [crosstalk]

19 ROBERT CUTHBERT: But for time...

20 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Sees that the
21 legal component of this is going to have to be
22 addressed also to provide for the disability claims
23 and for the discharge upgrades that you went through,
24 so.

1
2 ROBERT CUTHBERT: It doesn't necessarily
3 even have to be a lawyer. You don't have to be a
4 lawyer to do a DOD upgrade application, but in all...
5 with deep respect to the VSOs, they could receive
6 additional training on how to do a discharge upgrade
7 application or an effective discharge upgrade
8 application since the rates are really traditionally
9 right now are extremely low. It takes special
10 training, frankly.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Thank you.

12 ROBERT CUTHBERT: Okay.

13 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: So a quick search on
14 Google revealed Boston has a department or an agency
15 of veterans' services; I think Oklahoma City; I think
16 there's one or two in Florida, Texas and in Arizona
17 as well, so that this wouldn't be the first, but we
18 would hope it would be the best if we did it.

19 Council Member Cohen then Council Member Cabrera.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER COHEN: I'm not exactly
21 sure who to direct this to, but it seems to me that
22 multiple people testified that I mean the investment
23 of dollars on the city part would bring back multiple
24 dollars from the federal government; that there's a
25 lot of benefits out there for veterans that we are...

1
2 veterans are not able to access 'cause they need some
3 support. I don't know if there's any way to quantify
4 that, but that seems like a smart investment; that
5 we're bringing back a lot of money to New York if we
6 were able, and to go to Chairman Ulrich's point is
7 that if we had an agency we could do oversight and
8 maybe we could quantify some of that and bolster the
9 argument for doing that. I don't know if you have
10 any idea; any sense of how much money is being left
11 on the table or how much in terms of resources.

12 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: So Redmond just
13 brought up a good point to your point about the
14 veterans' benefits counselor full-time on average
15 would bring back how much a year? Three or \$4
16 million of federal money into the pocket of that
17 veteran or the family of that veteran and they can
18 then spend it in their communities. It's an economic
19 stimulant. It's shifting the burden, quite frankly,
20 from the city and the state to the federal government
21 where it belongs and would help the local economy.
22 It would help the veterans; give them the help that
23 they're entitled to, so there's a host of benefits,
24 but as we mentioned, there really isn't the support
25 outside of the VSOs, which do phenomenal work. You

1
2 know, the city is really not doing the best it could
3 be doing because they don't have the resources and I
4 don't think that up until this point that they've had
5 what they needed to actually accomplish that, so.
6 Why don't we go to Council Member Cabrera and then
7 we'll call up the next panel.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: I'll make it
9 short. Mr. Chairman, I want to just ask for my name
10 to be added to this bill. I want to thank you for
11 your leadership in bringing forth this bill forward.
12 I mean this is to me a no-brainer. The
13 respectability factor here would just be exponential.
14 I think that the needs will be taken more serious. I
15 would think even council members will be even more
16 eager to give; to allocate actually to organizations
17 representing veterans because they know the money...
18 well, they're not going to have through all this
19 bureaucracy and we're always conscious about that;
20 most conscious if the money's going to get to them?
21 Is it going get to them quickly? Are they going to
22 have to go through multiple directives? So Mr.
23 Chair, I want to accentuate the fact that this
24 brilliant... I'm sitting here and thinking how come
25 we haven't done this before. I would hope the

1 administration will move quickly. This is... at this
2 point, it's an issue of volition of the will. Are we
3 going do it? Are we not going to do it? You have my
4 110,000 percent support.
5

6 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Okay, thank you and
7 thank you for your testimony. Thank you. The next
8 panel is Patrick Gualtieri representing the Veterans
9 Advisory Board on behalf of Vincent McGowen; Anne
10 Trenkle from New York City Helmets to Hardhats.
11 Hello, Anne. Fang Wong, my friend from the American
12 Legion, New York County and Audrey Carr, Legal
13 Services NYC. [background voices] If you have copies
14 of testimony, please give them to the Sergeant-at-
15 Arms and the clock will start at five minutes for
16 each speaker for your testimony. Let's just wait for
17 Miss Carr to be seated and we'll start from the right
18 this time. We'll start with Miss Carr, if you're
19 ready.

20 AUDREY CARR: I am ready.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Before you begin,
22 we'll have the swearing in.

23 AUDREY CARR: Thank you.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Can the panelists
25 please raise their right hands? Do you affirm to

1
2 tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the
3 truth in your testimony before this committee and to
4 respond honestly to council member questions?

5 ALL PANELISTS: I do.

6 CHAIPERSON ULRICH: Okay, thank you very
7 much. Miss Carr, the floor is yours.

8 AUDREY CARR: Thank you, Council Member
9 Ulrich. Good afternoon. My name is Audrey Carr and
10 I direct the Veterans Justice Project of Legal
11 Services NYC. Our project's main goal is to advocate
12 for veterans who are struggling with housing,
13 subsistence income, employment, family stability and
14 other needs. We provide direct legal representation
15 to low-income veterans who are facing eviction,
16 grappling with consumer debt and income security and
17 we assist veterans in connecting with social and
18 mental health services. We also train staff at the
19 various veterans' social services organizations in
20 the city in the legal issues affecting the veteran
21 community.

22 From a Legal Services perspective, we
23 strongly support the Council's efforts to create a
24 Department of Veterans Affairs. While we applaud the
25 Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs for its work on

1
2 behalf of the city's veterans, MOVA is limited in
3 scope, power, funding and resources. Having a
4 Veterans Department within the city apparatus will
5 bring legitimacy to the city's concern for its
6 veterans population and more importantly, a city's
7 Veterans Affairs Department will be instrumental in
8 advocating for veterans to ensure that state and
9 local laws benefitting veterans are enforced.

10 As the committee is well aware, New York
11 City's veterans are struggling. Every day, we
12 represent veterans in housing court, family court and
13 in other forums to help them secure benefits and
14 other rights. Although the state and city have laws
15 in place that provide preferences to veterans to
16 secure housing and employment, these preferences are
17 routinely not enforced. For instance, we have
18 repeatedly sued the city's Department of Housing
19 Preservation and Development for its refusal to apply
20 the veterans' preference to veterans seeking housing
21 in Mitchell-Lama housing developments. We have also
22 intervened with the Social Security Administration
23 after that agency denied a veteran's disability
24 claim. As a result, the veteran now receives
25 approximately \$800 a month and also about \$115,000 in

1
2 back benefits. In yet another case, we sued the
3 city's Department of Consumer Affairs for denying a
4 veteran a vendor's license because he was mentally
5 disabled. We are currently representing a woman on
6 active duty who is facing eviction.

7 Besides coordinating public events, such
8 as Patriots Day or Veterans and Memorial Day, a city
9 Department of Veterans Affairs can advise and assist
10 veterans and their dependents who avail themselves of
11 federal and of state benefits, for which they may be
12 eligible. Moreover, a Department of Veterans Affairs
13 would also act as a watchdog to ensure that other
14 city agencies aren't denying veterans their rights
15 and benefits to which they are entitled to under the
16 law, and be a liaison for the veterans among the many
17 city agencies.

18 Given the lack of essential agencies
19 solely devoted to veterans in this city, several
20 public agencies and non-profit organizations have
21 started a groundbreaking initiative to coordinate and
22 deliver services, resources and care to New York
23 City's veterans. The city should not be left out of
24 this endeavor and with the city's Department of
25

1
2 Veterans Affairs, the city will be a full partner in
3 this effort. Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Audrey.
5 Let's go to Mr. Wong.

6 FANG WONG: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I
7 apologize, members of the Council, I didn't have a
8 prepared... this is tough. I don't have a prepared
9 testimony because up until about 30 minutes ago, I
10 wasn't going to testify. I thought this is an open
11 and shut case; what's there to say? But then I was
12 basically encouraged by my colleagues that remind me
13 of my duty, so here I am.

14 I would like to take the opportunity...
15 well, let's... let me talk a little bit about myself.
16 This is bad. I was the National Commander for the
17 American Legion two years ago, the largest veterans
18 organization in the United States, 2.4 million and we
19 have over like 14,000 posts throughout the United
20 States and basically just like any other
21 organization, we also have four pillars. Our four
22 pillar basically is strong national defense, veterans
23 rehabilitation, children and youth committee and
24 service and Americanism. So all along, in New York
25 City at least, throughout the year the American

1
2 Legion, with our many posts spread out through the
3 different borough, we were not really involved that
4 much with the city MOVA's office; interaction or
5 whatever, not until about a couple years ago, when
6 Commissioner Holliday started extending an outreach
7 with us and then we started working together on some
8 of the projects and it's going quite well. And Mr.
9 Chairman, I'd also like to thank you for outreach to
10 us a few months back to have... share our
11 understanding of each other; you know, what roles
12 that we're playing. With this then age of less and
13 less resources and harder and harder and with you
14 know, so many thousands of veterans returning home,
15 it's imperative that we need to work together so we
16 could go ahead and maximize our effort. So that's
17 why we're here. That's why we have our continuous
18 dialogue.

19 When I first received this bill less than
20 a week ago, I was really going crazy, but through
21 Redmond's effort, we had several long discussions and
22 he enlightened me that even though that I served my
23 adult career with the military, I was never involved
24 with the federal state law... city government
25 bureaucracies and all of a sudden I was enlightened

1 that when you're looking at a bill where there are
2 many, many holes, as I explained to Redmond the other
3 day. I said, "What are we doing here?" And finally,
4 you know, after we walked through it, I realized that
5 it goes back to our first meeting a couple months ago
6 when you hit on us about the importance of having a
7 separate department. Then all of a sudden the light
8 turned on, yes, and I also was told that this is but
9 only the first step of getting the department. The
10 important thing... [coughs] I'm sorry. The important
11 thing is to have the commissioner have the ability to
12 direct a budget so that he or she could go ahead and
13 execute the type of work that's required. With that,
14 I'm 100 percent for it, so and I understand that
15 there are a lot of issues that I expressed our
16 concern to Redmond and he was supposed to come up
17 later on. Once the Department is created, we hope
18 certainly that we have time to sit down before this
19 type of a meeting to go over our concern and then
20 hopefully we can come up with an agreeable or
21 workable solution before we can send it to cut down
22 on the confusions and make it work a lot better. The
23 benefit I can see off the top with a direct budget,
24 which you know, in the largest city in the world with
25

1
2 billions and billions in the total city budget, it's
3 a shame that we don't even have a budget to operate
4 for the commissioner. How do you explain that? Just
5 for that, I think we need to go ahead and vote. By
6 the way, if the signature here or the co-sponsor
7 needs, so hopefully by the end of the day, Mr.
8 Chairman, you will add at least three more names in
9 addition to Mr. Cabrera's name to the sponsorship.
10 They need to do that. If they serve in the VA
11 Committee, I think they should understand it's
12 important, otherwise why are we sitting here?

13 In the other case, it's like I'm looking
14 forward to working with the new commissioner. The
15 American Legion will always be open and we want to be
16 a player. We want to have some say because
17 understand that we overlap a lot in our work and
18 there's no sense to duplicate anything in the future.
19 By having a direct budget and hopefully through the
20 negotiation and going through the creating of the
21 actual missions and functions of the new department,
22 the commissioner's office will be able to streamline
23 a lot of the duplications and save some money to go
24 on the other projects too, so that will go down in
25 the role I'm sure as we... as people see with this.

1
2 Just one quick answer: I believe
3 Councilman Cohen asked a question about what does a
4 service officer bring back on veteran's claim? The
5 American Legion we have over several [chime]
6 thousands of service officers service for free taking
7 care of veterans anywhere, no questions asked. We do
8 have a office located right here, co-located with the
9 Veterans Administration building in West Houser [sic]
10 Street. We have three full-time service officer,
11 VSOs, paid by the American Legion and its staff, so
12 hopefully if you're interested, I could call John's
13 office. Maybe they could go ahead and calculate the
14 numbers of veterans taken care of and the number...
15 the dollar size it brings back and kind of give you a
16 more factual idea of you know, what can happen if we
17 have one service officer to provide that. I guess my
18 time's up and thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you.

20 FANG WONG: Sorry to keep coughing.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: That's alright. Mr.
22 Wong, you... always good to see you.

23 FANG WONG: Thanks.

24 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Let's hear from Anne
25 Trenkle.

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2 ANNE TRENKLE: Good afternoon, Mr.
3 Chairman... I can't speak today and members of the
4 committee. My name is Anne Trenkle and I'm the
5 executive director for New York City Helmets to
6 Hardhats. New York City Helmets to Hardhats is a 501
7 (c) (3) non-profit organization, which is
8 transitioning veterans, as well as members of the
9 Reserves or National Guard to gain employment with
10 the New York City Construction Trades and their
11 employers as well. We are here this afternoon to
12 testify on this bill intended to establish a
13 Department of Veterans Affairs or elevate MOVA.

14 Initiative 314 has the support of New
15 York City Helmets to Hardhats program. This bill
16 would respectively establish... number one, establish
17 a Department of Veterans Affairs to serve active duty
18 members of the Armed Forces. It also needs to
19 specify members of the Reserve and the National
20 Guard. Number two, it establishes a Veterans
21 Advocacy Board, populated by veterans to serve
22 veterans, and number three, provide a single
23 comprehensive department to inform and connect
24 members of the Armed Forces with the resources they
25 need.

1
2 The Council has worked with New York City
3 Helmets to Hardhats to assure that this bill will
4 promote better service to our members of the Armed
5 Forces, as well as identifying and funding programs
6 that will actively serve veterans. We commend these
7 efforts.

8 Among the issues addressed in our
9 comments are that Initiative 314 states that a
10 Department of Veterans Affairs will be established.
11 We support the establish of the department, as well
12 as the office of commissioner. We believe the
13 creation of this office will be in the best interests
14 for serving the multitude of needs of the veteran
15 community in a comprehensive manner. Among the
16 issues also addressed in our comments, Initiative 314
17 will create a Veterans Advisory Board containing nine
18 members, all veterans, represented in the five
19 boroughs of New York City. We would like to express
20 our support for the designation of veteran liaisons
21 from each city agency. Navigating veteran services
22 and employment opportunities on various websites is
23 currently overwhelming. It's an overwhelming task,
24 usually with dismal results. We firmly believe that
25 having responsible individuals in positions would

1
2 streamline the information and application processes
3 for veterans under the umbrella of the Department of
4 Veterans Affairs.

5 We've heard multiple testimonies today
6 from organizations that are passionate about helping
7 veterans. Let's have a Mayor's Office of Veterans
8 Affairs that will exhibit the same passion as we do.
9 We remain committed to working with the Council and
10 the administration on this initiative. We expect
11 that passage of this bill will streamline and
12 increase the efficacy of programs and services
13 without duplication to veterans in New York City. We
14 look forward to continuing to work with this
15 committee on these critically important issues. In
16 particular, I'd like to commend Councilman Ulrich and
17 the Veterans Committee for their support and forward
18 thinking to bring necessary change to this
19 department. Thank you.

20 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you and
21 Patrick Gualtieri.

22 PATRICK GUALTIERI: Thank you. I'm here
23 today on behalf of Vince McGowan, who is the chairman
24 of the Veterans Advisory Board and unfortunately, he
25

1
2 couldn't be here and so I'm going to read verbatim
3 his statement. Thank you.

4 My name is Vincent McGowan and I am the
5 chairman of the city's Veterans Advisory Board, VAB.
6 The VAB was chartered in 1987, under Local Law 53, to
7 advise the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, MOVA,
8 on all matters concerning veterans. In 19... I'm
9 sorry. In 2002, Local Law 45 expanded the VAB from
10 five to nine members, five appointed by the Mayor and
11 four appointed by the City Council, with each borough
12 represented on the Board. In 2006, Intro 233
13 enhanced the structure of the VAB and added annual
14 reporting requirements. The first chairman of the VA
15 B was elected in 2008.

16 First, I would like to express the VAB's
17 appreciation to the Committee on Veterans for giving
18 us the opportunity to comment upon Intro 314. Over
19 the years, the VAB has worked closely with the
20 Mayor's office and the City Council on a myriad of
21 issues affecting today's veterans. It is hoped that
22 by now, the old days of thinking that veterans are
23 strictly a federal issue are over. Veterans also
24 need local programs and the revenues that can be
25 realized by the city through veteran business

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2 initiatives and increased numbers of successful VA
3 claims are hopefully a no-brainer at this point.

4 However, the VAB is cautious with Intro
5 314 because of the current transition with a new
6 commissioner at MOVA, the temporary placement of
7 MOVA's offices and the implications of this unfunded
8 mandate during a delicate fiscal time. We believe
9 that MOVA is already underfunded and the fact that
10 three trained veterans claims counselors were
11 recently not included in the budget and lost last
12 month, only adds to our concerns. Where will these
13 funds to create an entire agency come from? What
14 kind of changes and/or interruption in current MOVA
15 services would occur if this legislation is passed?
16 Why is there is no inclusion of Reservists and
17 National Guard, who have been activated to serve in
18 the military in the definitions contained in section
19 3101? Here, the VAB recommends adopting the state's
20 definition of a veteran for continuity. Further, we
21 would recommend that a new state OTS programs for
22 disabled veterans business enterprises also be
23 included in section 31-302. Finally, the VAB
24 recommends further study and revisions of this
25 legislation perhaps through a subcommittee, which

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2 would also include members of the Committee on Small
3 Business.

4 In closing, the VAB looks forward to
5 further City Council review of Intro 314 and
6 ramifications it would present to our veterans and to
7 the city of New York. Thank you. Vincent McGowan,
8 Chairman VAB.

9 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Patick.
10 Just an update on the point that was made before
11 about other cities and municipalities having offices
12 or Departments of Veterans Affairs. Yonkers, just to
13 the north of the Bronx, has a Department of Veteran
14 Services with a full website, talking about burial
15 benefits, survivor's rights, disability benefits,
16 employment and training, events, property tax
17 assessments, ways to support our troops, worker
18 retraining program. I mean you name it, it's there
19 and it's kind of interesting that Yonkers is a little
20 bit of the city of New York in that respect and
21 terms. Also, Houston Texas, the city of Cambridge,
22 Massachusetts and Columbus, Ohio. That's all I've
23 been able to find on Google, but I know that there
24 are more. Do any of my colleagues have any questions
25 for any of the speakers today? I wanted to get back

1
2 to your point, Audrey, about the discharge upgrades.
3 How do you think the city could play a bigger role
4 you know, on that issue?

5 AUDREY CARR: Well, I mean I think
6 discharge upgrades are really complicated, like one
7 of the previous speakers spoke about from the Urban
8 Justice Center. It really takes a lot of training to
9 get the language right when you're trying to upgrade
10 someone's discharge because this is going to the
11 Department of Defense. It's notoriously difficult to
12 get someone's discharge changed and it requires a lot
13 of training to understand what kind of language DOD
14 is going to look for. It requires making sure that
15 if a veteran was discharged because of bad behavior,
16 maybe there was some PTSD or Traumatic Brain Injury
17 and having a doctor evaluate that veteran so you'd
18 have supporting documentation to put forth to the
19 DOD. So that's something I think that maybe you
20 know, the city with a Department of Veterans Affairs
21 could make those types of folks available to veterans
22 to help them to get access to the proper assistance
23 when they are crafting their requests for discharge
24 upgrades.

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Okay, thank you.

Any other questions? Seeing none, I will dismiss the panel and we'll move on to the next group. Linda Crowley, Joseph from the VAB. How do you say your last name, Joe? I'm sorry?

JOSEPH GRAHAM: Graham.

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Graham, okay.

JOSEPH GRAHAM: Like the crackers.

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: I'm sorry. Your handwriting is average. The nuns would not be happy. I'm guessing you went to Catholic school. [background voices] They... Sister Mary Francis would not approve. Please take a seat in the dais. [background voices] Okay, that's alright. That's alright. Joseph and Linda Crowley. Is Linda Crowley in?

LINDA CROWLEY: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Okay, there you are, ma'am, okay. And we had one that signed up, but I think he left momentarily.

LINDA CROWLEY: Okay. Hi, my name...

[crosstalk]

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: We're...

[crosstalk]

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LINDA CROWLEY: Is...

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: [interposing] We're going to swear you in first.

LINDA CROWLEY: Oh, okay.

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Hold on.

LINDA CROWLEY: I'm sorry.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Will the witnesses raise their right hand, please? Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this committee and to respond honestly to council member questions?

LINDA CROWLEY: Yes.

JOSEPH GRAHAM: I do.

LINDA CROWLEY: I do.

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Let's begin with Miss Crowley.

LINDA CROWLEY: Hi, I am a member of Military Families Speak Out. We were formed roughly 2002 by families of servicemen who joined since 9/11 and we take a position and opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We say bring our troops home and take care of them when they return.

We'd like to speak in favor of the proposal for a Department of Veterans Affairs to

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2 handle the legal, educational, housing and mental
3 health issues and I concur with most of the speakers
4 that came before.

5 Perhaps at least 50 percent of those
6 suffering from PTSD do not actually seek help. We
7 offer this statement in honor of those vets who have
8 taken their own lives, suffering the trauma of war
9 and their families, who've suffered with them and
10 will continue suffering when they are gone.

11 Last week, after aerial bombardment of
12 Iraq and Syria began and there was talk of possible
13 ground forces, Jacob George became the latest victim
14 of war. He took his own life. On a daily basis, it
15 is estimated that there are 22 veterans a day who
16 take their own lives. George was a veteran and a
17 warrior for peace. He returned to Afghanistan on
18 peace missions. He was a mentor to other veterans
19 and yet, I guess after the talk of more war, he
20 succumbed.

21 We ask that the definition of veterans be
22 changed, as was spoken of by a previous speaker, to
23 include even those who have perhaps a dishonorable
24 discharge due to PTSD, TBI or even careless, reckless
25 behavior. Due to those who have gone and those who

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2 have gone AWOL due to racial discrimination, hazing
3 or sexual trauma and who have sought to become
4 conscientious objectors, we seek to have this
5 department include veterans and female members who
6 have served and also include families of members who
7 have served. Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you very much,
9 Miss Crowley and we will hear from Joseph Graham.

10 JOSEPH GRAHAM: Good afternoon, Mr.
11 Chairman and members of the committee. My name is
12 Joseph Graham. I am president of the Vietnam
13 Veterans of America, Manhattan Chapter 126.

14 I did not come with a prepared statement,
15 but I wanted to express our support from my chapter
16 members, who I have spoken to, of this upgrade to
17 a... New York City we should have a Department of
18 Veterans Affairs. We have some questions about it.
19 I understand that the bill is trying to be passed
20 through this year as opposed to next year after
21 everybody is involved that is of consequence within
22 our community. You have... I was glad to see Dewey
23 Wong here. He's a very active member in American
24 Legion. At one time, Vietnam Veterans of America
25 stepped up when the old-timers in the American legion

1 backed off from supporting first of all, us Vietnam
2 veterans coming home and secondly, running the
3 Veterans Day Parade. So but the involvement... and I
4 guess maybe this goes to the issue of involvement and
5 I think this department would be able to allow us...
6 for everyone to get involved, so we'd like to have a
7 charade [sic] of some sort and have other
8 organizations and veteran welcome them in and get
9 their opinion as to what's going on. You pretty much
10 hit on everything. That gentleman that was talking
11 about having veteran service officers upgrade... help
12 file to upgrade the discharges; unfavorable
13 discharges. Veteran service officers, it's a little
14 above his grade; pay grade. You... I think you need
15 legal on that when you're getting involved in
16 something like that and we have plenty of people in
17 our community that were unfairly discharged because
18 of sexual orientation, 'cause mental health, PTSD and
19 now we have our new commissioner. I'm looking
20 forward to your efforts. I've spoke with people over
21 at the PTSD unit at 23rd Street. They absolutely are
22 looking forward to meeting with you. With all these
23 people coming home, all these young men and women
24 coming back to our state and they're suffering from
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2 PTSD and brain injuries and so on and so forth and
3 the dollars have gotten tighter, we need an organized
4 effort. I think a Department of Veterans Affairs
5 would absolutely do that, but I would like to say
6 we'd like to get some more involvement. We'd hate to
7 have this thing rushed through. We'd like to hear
8 from the Mayor's office as to what he feels about it.
9 We don't want to have a bill sent through that nobody
10 knows what's going on until after the... we're doing
11 that now with the... on a federal level. A bill goes
12 through and now everybody's trying to figure out what
13 the hell is in it. We would prefer that you take
14 your time and let's put this thing together and
15 organize it right. That's it.

16 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Joe and I
17 can assure you and all the stakeholders that are here
18 that we will definitely engage the veterans'
19 community before any further action or consideration
20 is made on this bill. This... today is just the
21 beginning, the very beginning. It's an opportunity
22 for people to talk about their own experiences from a
23 VSO perspective or from an individual perspective in
24 dealing with MOVA and how they think MOVA can perform
25 better and what they think about the idea or the

1
2 concept of having a city Department of Veterans
3 Affairs for veterans services. I'll give you a
4 recommendation that came in after the LS request was
5 put in, which I thought was very good. Aside from
6 the one that we heard today about continuity with the
7 state definition of a veteran, which I think is very
8 important. That change I can...

9 [crosstalk]

10 JOSEPH GRAHAM: Absolutely.

11 [crosstalk]

12 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Assure you will be
13 made and that was just a minor... something that was
14 simply overlooked. Changing the name of the city
15 Department of Veterans Affairs to the Department of
16 Veteran Services I think would go a long way, so as
17 not to confuse veterans that when they call the city
18 Department of Veterans Affairs, some people might
19 think that they're calling the VA and they're not.

20 JOSEPH GRAHAM: That's...

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: [interposing] And we
22 certainly don't want to confuse a veteran or spouse
23 of a veteran or a family member of a veteran into
24 thinking that when they call 212 whatever that number
25 was that they called the right number because maybe

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2 they didn't. You know, maybe they do need to speak
3 to someone in the VA and I'm sure that someone in the
4 city would connect them with that, but we want to
5 eliminate ambiguity. We really don't want to confuse
6 people in any way and so other cities have Department
7 of Veterans Services. I think the state has
8 Department of Veteran Services and maybe the city
9 should have Department of Veteran Services. The
10 point is we will send the draft of this bill and
11 continue meetings with Commissioner Sutton, with the
12 VAB and with folks in the veterans community so that
13 they can give this a really robust review before we
14 go to the Mayor's office and say, "This is something
15 that the Council really would like to pass." Because
16 we don't want to pass something, as you stated, that
17 nobody really knows much about, so I can assure you
18 today's the beginning. It's not the end and we're
19 just going to take it from here. Any comments or
20 questions from Council Member Vallone? I know there
21 are other hearings today, by the way. That's why
22 some of my colleagues left, but I really appreciate
23 you coming. Any other people signed up to testify?
24 I think that's it for the day. Okay, so the meeting
25 is...

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

[crosstalk]

JOSEPH GRAHAM: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Adjourned. Thank
you very much for everyone's patience.

[background voices]

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 10/02/2104