



Testimony of Loree Sutton, M.D., Brigadier General, U.S. Army, Retired
Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services
New York City Council Committee on Veterans
Preliminary Budget Hearing - Veterans

Committee Room - City Hall
12:00pm, Monday, March 6, 2017

Good afternoon, Chair Ulrich and the members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Loree Sutton and I am honored to serve as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). I am joined today by Jeff Roth, our Deputy Commissioner, and we thank you for the opportunity to meet and discuss DVS' Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2018.

As you know, DVS is the newest agency in the City of New York. In 2016, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs transitioned into a full citywide agency specifically devoted to the well-being and support of veterans and their families, now known as the New York City Department of Veterans' Services. The New York City Council passed historic legislation, which was then signed into law by Mayor Bill de Blasio in the form of Local Law 113, to create a branch of our city government dedicated to building the strongest foundation possible for connecting veterans and their families with high quality services across a variety of needs. Through enduring collaboration, we are strengthening our veterans' capacity for and commitment to, continued service within our city.

Each new fiscal year presents the opportunity to examine the City's resources and make decisions that ensure that we can continue delivering the support that our veterans across the five boroughs have earned. In our first year of existence, we are proud that DVS has been able to make huge strides in addressing the needs of veterans.

At the outset of DVS' creation, under the de Blasio Administration, \$3.6 million in funding was allocated under the agency's FY17 budget. Part of the inaugural agency budget was assigned to staffing, as well as certain non-recurring start-up costs such as the purchase of computers, office equipment, supplies, and furniture. DVS is truly a "start-up" entity, and as the first new agency in The City of New York in over 15 years, the agency has diligently worked to onboard a talented and diverse group of professionals to match resources with veteran needs. Since April 2016, the agency has grown to a staff of 32 individuals, and is well on its way to hiring the additional professionals who will bring us to a total of 35 DVS team members.

Most importantly, the FY17 budget included funding for the agency's core services and initiatives, such as promoting care, resources and holistic services that address the full impact of war, connecting homeless veterans with housing and appropriate after-care services, increased community outreach, and procuring the *VetConnectNYC* platform to connect veterans to a constellation of service providers throughout New York City.

We are continually evaluating ways to enhance services and, as part of the FY18 Executive Budget process, will be funding for the continuation of the Aftercare Coordinator position and improvements to *VetConnectNYC*. We are confident the upcoming budget talks will translate into a financial plan that will enable DVS and the City of New York to continue serving those who have so bravely served our nation.

I would also like to applaud Chair Ulrich and the members of the Veterans Committee, together with Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and Finance Chair Julissa Ferreras-Copeland for increasing its Veteran Initiative funding to a total of \$1.3 million to address issues such as veterans' mental health, unemployment, and homelessness in FY17. Vital support for programs geared towards legal services, mental health, community development, homelessness prevention, and job placement services materialized because of an appreciation for the distinct needs of our over 210,000 New York City veterans. We look forward to tracking the continued commitments for this initiative in the coming fiscal year.

Core to DVS is the belief that veterans and their families are our City's leading natural renewable resource, and their strength and demonstrated commitment to public service will help New York City thrive. Veterans consistently tell the agency that navigating services is one of the biggest challenges in accessing services. So at DVS, we take the trial and error out of navigation. DVS works with veterans one-on-one to help them figure out what benefits they might be eligible for and how to get access to services.

DVS' Three Lines of Action are as follows:

- Housing & Support Services
- Whole Health & Community Resilience
- City Employment, Entrepreneurship, Education, Events & Engagement

Housing & Support Services

The Department is dedicated to effectively ending veteran homelessness in New York City. The Housing and Support Services (HSS) Unit leads and supports initiatives to expand and improve housing and social service resources available to NYC veterans and their families, and provides assistance to veterans navigating existing resources. Its top priority is working with homeless veterans, developing and sustaining a system that rapidly rehouses all those that become homeless, and working with DVS' public and private partners to prevent homelessness in the first place.

In fact, in December of 2015, the federal government certified that the City of New York ended chronic veteran homelessness. This means that the veterans who were living with a disability and had been homeless for the longest period of time were housed. The Department of Veterans' Services has led the nation in its response to homelessness by connecting 1600 homeless veterans with permanent, affordable housing this past year alone and markedly decreasing the time it takes to house a veteran.

DVS will continue to work with its City, state, federal and community partners, focusing on:

- Meeting "Functional Zero": ending homelessness for veterans currently in shelter and developing a rapid rehousing system for housing new veterans within 90 days of entry.
- Mitigating recidivism by bolstering 'aftercare' services through a dedicated coordinator who drives assessment priorities and fully leverages the vital veteran peer coordinator

role. This role is now permanently funded, providing essential continuity following the completion of its current grant.

Leading efforts to systematize the assessment and housing placement of homeless veterans across systems and resources and scale this system to benefit all homeless New Yorkers.

Whole Health & Community Resilience

DVS is actively working with First Lady Chirlane McCray's mental health initiative, *ThriveNYC*, to overcome stigma, foster engagement, and connect individuals to professional services. The *VetsThriveNYC* Whole Health Program is the DVS veteran-focused complement to the First Lady's pioneering *ThriveNYC* Mental Health Roadmap. The goal of *VetsThriveNYC* is to improve the lives of NYC veterans and their families by enhancing access to a comprehensive range of services specifically tailored to their needs and strengths with a targeted focus on a coordinated integration of clinical and holistic services, incorporating peer social support, cultural engagement and the arts, that address the full impact of war on the mind, body and spirit.

The *VetsThriveNYC* Whole Health Program consists of two components:

1. *'Core4' Whole Health Model*: Non-linear dynamic model featuring four domains: Cultural Engagement & the Arts (C1); Connection via Peer Social Support (C2); Community Holistic Services (C3); and Clinical Treatment (C4).
2. *Consortium Steering Group*: Community experts who serve as leads for each of the Core 4 domains; DVS and its steering group partners will engage the broader NYC community to form the City-wide consortium in Spring 2017.

City Employment, Education, Entrepreneurship, Events & Engagement

Since its launch in 2016, The Department of Veterans' Services has achieved a great deal in facilitating ease of access with all levels of government. DVS aims to improve access to veteran benefits by placing Community Outreach Specialists to serve as a direct link between the community in each borough and DVS by providing the human element of one-on-one support. Community Outreach Specialists are trained to connect veterans and their families to trusted resources available to them from the City, State, and Federal governments. Deployed to the five boroughs, Specialists create a citywide presence, and take information on programs and services to veterans in their community through collaborative partnership with host sites, with five sites across four boroughs already open for business.

Since April 2016, DVS has engaged with veterans across the City at over 150 outreach events, and assisted over 1,500 veterans and family members one-on-one both at our main office at 1 Centre and satellite offices.

In addition, DVS is executing a strategy for recruiting and connecting veterans and their families to city careers, services and resources through a phased action plan aimed at 1) upgrading the DVS website for direct access to City job opportunities, 2) collaborating with DCAS City-wide Recruitment/*WorkForce 1* and the public/private sectors to identify HR best practices, 3) standardizing City-wide intake forms to foster self-identification of veterans & families, and 4) exploring ways to engage with the veteran business community to enhance business and procurement opportunities for veteran business owners and entrepreneurs.

In February 2017, the Committee on Veterans held a hearing on the Veterans Advisory Board. DVS regularly employs the counsel of the Veterans Advisory Board, or VAB. Appointed by Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Mark-Viverito, the VAB was strategically selected to sustain a diverse range of service backgrounds, community engagement interests, and professional expertise to help facilitate dialogue with the New York City veterans' community.

I encourage everyone to access the VAB 2016 End of Year Report and meeting minutes, available on the DVS website. This end-of-year report provides a series of 2016's veterans' highlights at the City level, as well as some policy and information gathering recommendations to the City Council and City of New York. I greatly appreciate the work which went into this document, as it reflects the passion and deep commitment towards moving forward the interests and improving the lives of NYC veterans and their families.

Although DVS has been in business for less than one year, we have accomplished so much for our veterans, with the help of our partners in the New York City Council, the Mayor's Office, and our veteran advocate allies. We look forward to continued growth and development towards improving the lives of NYC veterans and their families. Thank you for this opportunity to testify about DVS' budget for FY18. I am pleased to address any questions you may have.

MISSION

As an educational and cultural nonprofit institution centered on the aircraft carrier *Intrepid*, a National Historic Landmark, the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum promotes the awareness and understanding of history, science and service through its collections, exhibitions and programming in order to honor our heroes, educate the public and inspire our youth.

COMMITMENT TO VETERANS

Over the past 30 years, the Intrepid Museum has established itself as a primary destination for important celebrations, commemorations and programs that serve veterans and active-duty service men and women, raising public awareness of the role of veterans and military personnel in our nation. Every year, for example, the Museum honors veterans in poignant Veterans Day and Memorial Day ceremonies on Pier 86. It came as no surprise that the Intrepid Museum was chosen as the venue for the ceremonial signing of legislation into law to establish the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS), a new city agency to aid New York City's 225,000 veterans.

DEMONSTRATED NEED

Intrepid Museum staff members have worked extensively with veterans at the Museum as well as community venues, senior centers and transitional housing sites throughout New York City. From these encounters, it is clear that DVS is a powerful advocate and centralizing force for a diffuse group of individuals and their loved ones, all with wide-ranging needs.

DVS primarily supports New York City veterans through housing and support services, whole health and community resilience services, and education, employment and entrepreneurship programs. The Intrepid Museum relies upon DVS staff members to provide training, programmatic feedback and direct connections to veteran networks.

INTREPID MUSEUM'S VETERANS ACCESS INITIATIVE

Directly in line with the DVS Whole Health & Community Resilience initiative, the Museum's Veterans Access Initiative offers a series of programs for veterans and their families, including veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, veterans with post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury and those who have been recently hospitalized. In addition, the Museum offers free general admission to all U.S. military and veterans thanks to the generous support of Bank of America.

Military Family Programs: Launched in the fall of 2015, these weekend programs provide a safe and supportive Museum experience for current and former service members, especially those who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. The goal of the program is to build a supportive community of recently reunited families and ease the transition back home. Offered on six select weekends, each three-hour program includes an hour of refreshments and games to help families get to know one another, an hour-long guided experience in the Museum, and an hour of hands-on design challenges and art-making that reinforce the program's theme and encourage families to work together.

Intrepid After Hours: Veterans are invited to attend *Intrepid After Hours*, a series of events launched in the spring of 2016. The events, held at the Museum from 4:30pm to 8:00pm, include exclusive access to the

Museum, an opportunity for veterans to express their own military stories and experiences—through visual/performance arts, a creative writing workshop or facilitated dialogue—and a catered dinner. The goal is to create a specialized, intimate environment.

Vet Video Chat: Vet Video Chat, launching soon, will build social connections and provide stimulating conversations for veterans who require intensive healthcare services at home or in a hospital setting. Offered as a series of four chats, the online program will highlight objects and spaces within the Museum and allow individuals to ask questions, make comments and share stories. This online learning and social experience will enrich the lives of individuals who are unable to leave their hospital bed or home. Prior to the videoconference, registered participants will receive a packet of informational material that complements the topic.

The Intrepid Museum also offers free customized guided tours for groups of veterans from the five boroughs.

Military Family Programs, *Intrepid* After Hours and Vet Video Chat explore a variety of topics, including the Museum's exhibition on the Vietnam War. Programs incorporate object-based learning experiences to create an accessible entry point for veterans, encouraging them to have fun, be comfortable and make creative connections with one another.

PARTNERSHIPS

Museum staff will continue to reach out to a variety of veterans organizations to ensure programming reaches appropriate audiences. Examples include the Department of Veterans' Services, the New York City Council, local VA medical centers, NYC Veterans Alliance, NYMetroVets, the CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and the United War Veterans Council, among others. Building on our longstanding partnership with the Department of Homeless Services, the Museum will explore whether programming can also be of assistance in the DOH's work with veterans experiencing homelessness.

PROGRAM STAFF TRAINING & QUALIFICATIONS

Programs are delivered by a dedicated team of Museum educators who are knowledgeable in areas such as military-related post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries, depression, family conflict and readjustment issues. In addition to training conducted by clinical experts from NYU Langone's Steven and Alexandra Cohen Military Family Clinic, the Museum looks forward to future professional development, including certification in Mental Health First Aid for Veterans via the Thrive NYC initiative.



NYC Veterans Alliance

www.nycveteransalliance.org

www.ourveterans.nyc

Testimony by

Kristen L. Rouse
Founding Director
NYC Veterans Alliance

**Committee on Veterans
Preliminary Budget Hearing**

NYC Council Committee on Veterans
Council Member Eric Ulrich, Chair

March 6, 2017

My name is Kristen Rouse. I served for more than 20 years of combined service in the United States Army, Army Reserve, and the New York National Guard, which included three tours of duty in Afghanistan, where I provided supply and maintenance support to warfighters, including planning and executing convoys missions and partnering with Afghan troops. I am here today to testify on behalf of the NYC Veterans Alliance, a member-supported, grassroots policy advocacy and empowerment organization serving veterans, servicemembers, and their families across the New York City metropolitan area.

We applaud the work of the NYC Department of Veterans' Services since its inception, and we have heard from our membership that they are impressed by the new staff who have been brought on board and the caliber of work they do. We look forward to the growth and expansion of DVS's role in ensuring that veterans and their families are able to connect with the benefits and services they so richly deserve. But we must be clear that this is only the beginning. As one of our members recently said at a rally here on the steps of City Hall: "It is not time to decrease funding while we are still at war." New Yorkers are serving right now, right this very minute on combat missions in the Middle East and Afghanistan. They aren't even back home yet, and there is much, much work still to be done to ensure they can take full advantage of the services and benefits they are owed right here in New York City.

While my organization offers no direct social services to veterans, we regularly refer veterans and family members to DVS for help, and we also hear back from individuals who tell us that DVS hasn't yet been able to help them. Just in the last couple of weeks we've heard from a veteran who told us he's been in the Borden Avenue homeless shelter for more than a year because he can't find a place to use his LINC voucher. We heard just last week from the widow of a veteran who is struggling to pay rent and prevent eviction who told us that DVS couldn't help her because first, she's not yet homeless, and second, because her veteran spouse is deceased. DVS needs to further expand its resources and connectivity with other city agencies and community organizations to provide more comprehensive help for veterans and their families—including widows and spouses. This is not a time to say "enough" and say further growth costs too much. DVS was created because of the enormity of the need and urgency of helping veterans and their families in NYC—which together represent 1 in 17 New Yorkers. Funding must go up, not be reduced.

For these reasons, we make the following recommendations for the Fiscal Year 2018

Budget:

1. **DVS's Budget Must Increase, Not Decrease.** Last year's budget total was \$3.95 million. We understand that this included one-time startup costs as well as private grant funding. But it is not acceptable for our city government to start finding cost savings in the DVS budget.
2. **DVS's Staffing Level Must Be Filled and Not Decreased.** Last year's staffing level for DVS was 35. This staffing level must remain in place, and all positions must be filled.
3. **DVS must provide oversight of the more than a million dollars that go annually to community based organizations.** One of the top recommendations we made in our June 2015 report on NYC veterans policy was for then-MOVA, now DVS, to provide appropriate vetting and oversight for discretionary funds from NYC Council going to community organizations for veterans services and welfare, and we again make this recommendation. The disparate agencies that have been tasked with oversight of these funds, including DYCD, SBS, and DOHMH simply do not have the expertise or holistic view of the NYC veterans community that DVS does. It is time for DVS to dedicate time and staffing to this critical oversight task to ensure that the city's funds are used appropriately to serve our city's veterans and families.
4. **We further urge NYC Council Members to allocate funding for the Alternative Tax Exemption for veteran homeowners.** School districts across Long Island and the entire state have been approving this fundamental and long-overdue tax exemption to make housing more affordable for veterans, and it is absolutely essential that NYC do so as well. Home ownership is a basic promise in the GI Bill of Rights for our nation's veterans—which has been eroded and made nearly impossible for veterans here in NYC. This tax exemption is just one step forward that NYC Council can take toward making housing more attainable and affordable for the veterans who served our nation and our city.

On behalf of the NYC Veterans Alliance, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Pending your questions, this concludes my testimony.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 3/6/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LOREE SUTTON, MD

Address: _____

I represent: DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES

Address: 1 CENTRE ST #2208, NEW NY 10007

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Name: JEFFREY ROTH

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Date: 3/6/17

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Name: Kristen Rouse

Address: 180 S. Oxford St Brooklyn 11217

I represent: NYC Veterans Alliance

Address: PO Box 532 NY NY 10159

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in favor in opposition

Date: 3/6/17

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Name: Barbara Johnson Stemler

Address: _____

I represent: Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum

Address: _____

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