

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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March 6, 2017  
Start: 12:15 p.m.  
Recess: 1:25 p.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: ERIC A. ULRICH  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Fernando Cabrera  
Alan N. Maisel  
Paul A. Vallone  
Joseph C. Borelli

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

Loree Sutton, Commissioner  
NYC Department of Veteran Services

Jeffrey Roth, Deputy Commissioner  
External Affairs  
NYC Department of Veterans Services

Kristen Rouse, Founding Director  
New York City Veterans Alliance

Barbara Johnson Stemler, Senior Manager  
Access Programs  
Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum



2 [sound check, pause]

3 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Great. Okay.

4 [gavel] Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the  
5 City Council Committee on Veterans hearing on the  
6 Fiscal 2018 Preliminary Budget. My name is Eric  
7 Ulrich. I serve as the Chair of the committee. I'd  
8 like to begin by acknowledging the members of the  
9 Finance staff that has joined us today John Russell  
10 [pause] and Michael and Nicole, right. Okay, so  
11 that's it. Nobody else is coming. [background  
12 comments] Okay and we're waiting for the Council—the  
13 members of the committee to show up. Today, we'll  
14 hear testimony from Dr. Loree Sutton, Commissioner of  
15 the newly established Department of Veteran Services.  
16 The department's Fiscal Year 2018 Preliminary Budget  
17 totals \$3.6 million including \$2.9 million in  
18 personnel services funding to support 34 full-time  
19 positions. The department is organized by program  
20 areas that includes Community Outreach, Homeless  
21 Prevention, Mental Health Services and Central  
22 Administration. The Committee would to hear about—in  
23 significant detail about the Preliminary Budget and  
24 the Mayor's plan to examine whether the resources  
25 allocated to the department are adequate to conduct

2 its mission. We will also review the department's  
3 performance to date, and what we can expect moving  
4 forward. Furthermore, we would like to discuss the  
5 potential for expansion of the City's Veterans  
6 programming. In particular, we would like to hear  
7 your thoughts on the department's acting as—on the  
8 department potentially acting as a contracting agency  
9 for the various Council funded initiatives. The  
10 Council is happy to be working with Commissioner  
11 Sutton and the members of the Mayor's Administration  
12 as we develop a long-term strategy to support one of  
13 our city's most deserving populations. After we hear  
14 from the Administration, we will also hear from  
15 various veteran service organizations and members of  
16 the public who are concerned. And we've also be  
17 joined by Council Member Cabrera of the Bronx. So  
18 with that, we'll hear the Commissioner's testimony,  
19 and the committee counsel will swear in the  
20 Commissioner.

21 LEGAL COUNSEL: Please raise your right  
22 hand. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole  
23 truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony  
24 before today, and to answer Council Member questions  
25 honestly?

2 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [off mic] I do.

3 LEGAL COUNSEL: Thank you.

4 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Good afternoon,  
5 Chair Ulrich and members of the Committee on  
6 Veterans. My name is Loree Sutton, and I remain  
7 honored to serve as the first Commissioner of the New  
8 York City Department of Veteran Services. I'm joined  
9 today by Jeff Roth our Deputy Commissioner, and we  
10 thank you for the opportunity to meet and discuss  
11 DVS' Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2018. As you  
12 know, DVS is the newest agency in the city of New  
13 York. In 2016, the Mayor's Office of Veterans  
14 Affairs transitioned into a full citywide agency  
15 specifically devoted to the wellbeing and support of  
16 veterans and their families now known as the New York  
17 City Department of Veteran Services. The New York  
18 City Council passed historic legislation, which was  
19 then signed into law by Mayor Bill de Blasio in the  
20 form of Local Law 113 to create a branch of our city  
21 government dedicated to building the strongest  
22 foundation possible for connecting veterans and the  
23 families with high quality services across a variety  
24 of life needs. Through enduring collaboration we are  
25 strengthening our veterans' capacity for and

commitment to continued service within our City.

Each Fiscal—each new Fiscal Year presents the opportunity to examine the city's resources and make

decisions that ensure 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 our veterans and their

families. 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 truly is 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 on-board a talented and diverse group of

professionals to match resources with veteran needs.

I might add that a number of these talented

professionals are with us today. 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

1 team members by the end of this Fiscal Year. Most  
2 importantly, the FY17 Budget included funding for the  
3 agency's core services and initiatives, such as  
4 promoting care services, resources and holistic  
5 services that address the full impact of war,  
6 connecting homeless veterans with housing, and  
7 appropriate after care services, increased community  
8 outreach and procuring the Vet Connect NYC platform  
9 to connect veterans to a constellation of service  
10 providers throughout New York City. We are  
11 continually evaluating ways to enhance services and  
12 as part of the FY18 Executive Budget process will be  
13 funding for the continuation of the After Care  
14 Coordinator position, as well as improvements to Vet  
15 Connect NYC. We are confident that upcoming budget  
16 talks will translate into a financial plan that will  
17 enable DVS and the City of New York to continue  
18 serving those who have so bravely served our nation.  
19 I would also like to applaud Chair Ulrich and the  
20 members of the Veterans Committee together with  
21 Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and Finance Chair  
22 Julissa Ferreras-Copeland for increasing its veteran  
23 initiative funding to a total to \$1.3 million to  
24 address issues such as veterans' mental health,  
25



2 unemployment and homelessness in FY17. Vital support  
3 for programs geared [paused] Services, Mental Health,  
4 Community Development, Homelessness Prevention and  
5 Job Placement Services materialize because of an  
6 appreciation for the distinct needs of our over  
7 210,000 New York City veterans. We look forward to  
8 tracking the continued commitments for this  
9 initiative in the coming Fiscal Year. Core to DVS is  
10 the belief that veterans and their families are our  
11 city's leading natural renewable resource, and  
12 there's strength and demonstrated commitment to  
13 public service will help New York City thrive.  
14 Veterans consistently tell our agency that navigating  
15 services is one the biggest challenges in accessing  
16 services. So, at DVS we take the trial and error out  
17 of navigation. DVS works with veterans one-on-one to  
18 help them figure out what benefits they might be  
19 eligible for and how to get access to quality  
20 services. DVS' lines of action are as follows:  
21 Housing and Support Services, Whole Health and  
22 Community Resilience and City Employment  
23 Entrepreneurship, Education Events and Engagement.

24 Let's start with Housing and Support  
25 Services. The department is dedicated to effectively

2 ending veteran homelessness in New York City. The  
3 Housing and Support Services Unit leads and supports  
4 initiative to expand and improve housing and social  
5 service resources available to New York City veterans  
6 and their families, and provides assistance to  
7 veterans navigating existing resources. Its top  
8 priority is working with homeless veterans developing  
9 and sustaining a system that rapidly rehuses all of  
10 those that become homeless and working with DVS'  
11 public and partners to prevent homelessness in the  
12 first place. In fact, in December of 2015, the  
13 federal government certified that the City of New  
14 York ended chronic veteran homelessness. This means  
15 that the veterans who were living with a disability  
16 and had been homeless for the longest period of time  
17 were not housed. The Department of Veteran Services  
18 had led the nation in its response to homelessness by  
19 connect 1,600 homeless veterans with permanent  
20 affordable housing this past year alone, and markedly  
21 decreasing the time it takes to house a veteran from  
22 326 days in September of 2015 to 162 days in  
23 September of 2016. DVS will continue to work with  
24 its city, state, federal and community partners  
25 focusing on meeting Functional Zero, ending

2 homelessness for veterans currently in shelter and  
3 developing a rapid rehousing system for housing new  
4 veterans with 90 days of entry.

5 Mitigating Recidivism. By bolstering  
6 after care services through a dedicated coordinator  
7 who drivers assessment priorities and fully leverages  
8 the vital Veteran Peer Coordinator role. This role,  
9 an after care role is now permanently funded  
10 providing essential continuity following the  
11 completion of its current grant. Leading efforts to  
12 systematize the assessment and housing placement of  
13 homeless veterans across systems and resources and  
14 scale this system to benefit all homeless New  
15 Yorkers. We went on to whole health and community  
16 resilience. DVS is actively work with First Lady  
17 Chirlane McCray's Mental Health Initiative Thrive NYC  
18 to overcome stigma, foster engagement and connect  
19 individuals to professional services. The Vets  
20 Thrive NYC Whole Health Program is the DVS veteran  
21 focused complement to the First Lady's pioneering  
22 Thrive NYC Mental Health Road Map. The goal of Vets  
23 Thrive NYC is to improve the lives of New York City  
24 veterans and their families by enhancing access to a  
25 comprehensive range of services specifically tailored

2 to their needs and strengths with a targeted focus on  
3 a coordinated integration of clinical and holistic  
4 services incorporating peer social support, cultural  
5 engagement and the arts to address the full impact of  
6 war on the human mind, body and spirit. The Vets  
7 Thrive NYC Whole Health Program consists of two  
8 components:

9 1. The Core Four Whole Health Model.

10 This is a non-linear dynamic model featuring four  
11 domains:

12 C-1: Cultural Engagement and the Arts;

13 C-2: Connection versus-Connection Via  
14 Peer Social Support;

15 C-3: Community Holistic Services; and

16 C-4: Clinical Treatment.

17 2. Consortium Steering Group. Community  
18 experts who serve as leads for each of the Core 4  
19 domains. DVS and its steering group partners will  
20 engage the broader New York City community to form  
21 the citywide consortium this coming spring.

22 Moving onto city employment, education,  
23 entrepreneurship, events and engagement. Since its  
24 launch in 2016 the Department of Veterans Services  
25 has achieved a great deal of facilitating ease of

2 access with all levels of government. DVS aims to  
3 improve access to veteran benefits by placing  
4 community outreach specialists to serve as a direct  
5 link between the community in each borough and DVS by  
6 providing the human element of one-on-one support.  
7 Community Outreach Specialists are trained to connect  
8 veterans and their families to trusted resources  
9 available to them from the city, state and federal  
10 governments. Deployed to the five boroughs,  
11 Specialists create a citywide presence and take  
12 information on programs and services to veterans in  
13 their community through collaborative partnership  
14 with host sites. With five sites across four  
15 boroughs already open for business. Since April of  
16 2016, DVS has engaged with veterans across the city  
17 at over 150 outreach events, and has assisted over  
18 1,500 veterans family members one on one both at our  
19 main office at One Center Street and our satellite  
20 offices. In addition, DVS is executing a strategy  
21 for recruiting and connecting veterans and their  
22 families to city careers, services and resources  
23 through a phased action plan aimed at:

- 24 1. Upgrading the DVS website for direct  
25 access to city job opportunities;

2           2. Collaborating with the DCAS Citywide  
3 Recruitment and Workforce 1 and the public/private  
4 sectors to identify best practices of onboarding,  
5 recruiting and retaining veterans and their families;

6           3. Standardizing Citywide Intake Formers  
7 to foster self-identification of veterans and  
8 families; and

9           4. Exploring ways to engage with the  
10 veteran business community to enhance business and  
11 procurement opportunities for veteran business owners  
12 and entrepreneurs.

13           In February of 2017, the Committee on  
14 Veterans held a hearing on the Veterans Advisory  
15 Board. DVS regularly employs the Council of the  
16 Veterans Advisory Board or VAB. With us today  
17 representing the VAB is Joe Bello, who is the  
18 Secretary of the Veterans Advisory Board. Appointed  
19 by Mayor Bill de Blasio and Speaker Melissa Mark-  
20 Viverito, the VAB was strategically selected to  
21 sustain a diverse range of service backgrounds,  
22 community engagement interest and professional  
23 expertise to help facilitate dialogue with the New  
24 York City veterans' community. I encourage everyone  
25 to access the VAB 2016 End-of-Year Report in meeting

2 notes (sic) available on the DVS website. This end  
3 of year report provides a series of 2016 veterans  
4 highlights at the city level as well policy and  
5 information gathering, recommendations to the City  
6 Council and the city of New York. I greatly  
7 appreciate the work that went into this document as  
8 it reflects the passion and deep commitment towards  
9 moving forward with interest in improving the lives  
10 of New York City veterans and their families.

11           Although VBS has been in business—  
12 business now for less than one year, we have  
13 accomplished so much for our veterans and their  
14 families with the help of our partners in the New  
15 York City Council, this committee to be sure the  
16 Mayor's Office and our veteran advocate allies. We  
17 look forward to continued growth and development  
18 towards improving the lives of New York City veterans  
19 and their families. Thank you for this opportunity  
20 to testify about DVS' budget for FY18. I am pleased  
21 to address any questions you may have.

22           CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Commissioner, thank  
23 you as always for your testimony and for your good  
24 work helping our city's veterans. Before we move  
25 onto questioning I want to introduce several members

2 of the committee, and some of my colleagues who have  
3 joined us here. We've been joined by Council Member  
4 I. Daneek Miller from Queens, a big supporter of  
5 veterans. Council Member Joe Borelli of Staten  
6 Island a member of the committee, Council Member Paul  
7 Vallone a member of the committee, and I believe  
8 Council Member Cabrera was already recognized. So I  
9 wanted to get that out of the way.

10 The budget. First and foremost, I-I  
11 would like Commissioner if you can to address some of  
12 the concern that we heard initially when the Mayor  
13 announced the budget that there was going to be a  
14 potential decrease in \$200,000 in the funding from  
15 this fiscal-current Fiscal Year to the next, and I  
16 know that was an area that we cleared up at the last  
17 hearing, but maybe you want to address that.

18 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: We welcome the  
19 opportunity to clarify that, Mr. Chair. The first  
20 year budget the FY17 Budget, as I mentioned in my  
21 testimony, contained a number of first year start-up  
22 costs be it computers, supplies, equipment,  
23 furniture. Those are expenses that are not carried  
24 into year 2. There was also a question about the  
25 after care coordinator position. As I mentioned in



2 my testimony that has now been baselined so that  
3 there will be gap between the completion of the  
4 current grant funding that allowed us to bring  
5 position on board and the continuation of that vital  
6 service for our veterans.

7 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: So, and-and I  
8 appreciate that, and I want to thank you and the  
9 administration for baselining that funding and for  
10 pledging to keep that in place because that was a  
11 great concern that a lot of folks had. We've also  
12 been joined by Council Member Alan Maisel and-well,  
13 from Brooklyn. He's not in Brooklyn. He's in  
14 Manhattan right now but he's-he's [laughter] he's  
15 with us, and he's a member of the committee and a  
16 good friend. So putting that issue aside, let's move  
17 onto some of the programming areas. Do you know if  
18 the department has any plans to provide any  
19 additional direct services or programming through the  
20 Liaisons that you have in the boroughs, and maybe you  
21 want to talk briefly about some of the staff that you  
22 have. For instance in Queens Borough Hall I know you  
23 have--

24 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] Sure.

2 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: --one in Brooklyn as  
3 well, and I think you have plans to expand to all  
4 five boroughs--

5 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] Sure.

6 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: --at some point so--

7 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: We—we currently  
8 have our initial satellite office started in Queens.  
9 It's located in the Queens Borough Hall. We've had  
10 very strong support from the Queens Borough President  
11 leadership and her entire team, and it's been  
12 wonderful to be able to learn from the experience of  
13 Sergeant Daniel Rios, who heads up that office. We  
14 have now subsequently set up—we actually have two  
15 locations in Staten Island, again with strong support  
16 from the Staten Island Borough President as well as  
17 the College of Staten Island, and so Matt Basile is  
18 our Staten Island Community Outreach Specialist. We  
19 are in the process of setting up the North Manhattan  
20 satellite office as well as the Brooklyn satellite  
21 office, but we now also have our third borough, which  
22 is covered right currently is in the Bronx, and again  
23 we've had very strong support from the Bronx Borough  
24 President and the Bronx leadership, the veterans  
25 community. So we—we anticipate that the remaining

2 two satellite offices, which are currently in  
3 progress will be up and running shortly and we—we  
4 look forward to providing truly citywide presence and  
5 engagement working with veterans and their families  
6 as an example to determine whether they're eligible  
7 for claims benefits submission, whether they've  
8 already submitted a claim, need to track the  
9 progress. We're focused on helping them prepare  
10 those claims. There's a lot of paperwork and medical  
11 records that goes into that. That's one toll that  
12 they have in their toolkit, working with our BSO  
13 partners to make sure that there's a strong handoff  
14 and that those claims are followed and represented  
15 responsibly. Those Community Outreach Specialists—  
16 Specialists, they're also—they're an extension of our  
17 headquarters, DVS that's right here at One Center  
18 Street. So, they're able to really bring the full  
19 range of city services, care and resources that  
20 veterans might not be aware of, as well as to be  
21 accessible to veterans in each borough who no longer  
22 have to cross a river to come over and to find out  
23 how to resolve their rental grievance or how to  
24 access their GI Bill, or whatever the question may—  
25 may happen to be. So, we're—we've very excited.

2 The--they--they've--they've got their--their hands full.  
3 Our community outreach specialist and the veteran  
4 response in each of the--the boroughs where we have  
5 currently set up this service, the--the response has  
6 been phenomenal, very, very positive. So we look  
7 forward to getting all five boroughs up in the very  
8 near future.

9 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: It's--it's quite  
10 remarkable when you consider five years ago the  
11 former Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs was  
12 literally five or six employees sitting in Lower  
13 Manhattan and trying to do the best that they were  
14 able to do, but obviously woefully under staffed and  
15 under-resourced and now we're actually funding and  
16 seeing 35 staffers and a presence in all five  
17 boroughs handling various issue, right, to healthcare  
18 and legal services and housing issues and all these  
19 other types of--

20 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] It's  
21 remarkable and I think it truly demonstrates the  
22 support of this administration, Mayor de Blasio's  
23 leadership, this committee, the City Council under  
24 the Speaker's leadership, and supported by so many  
25 members of the City Council, and then as I've said so

2 many times before, we've got the best veteran  
3 advocates in the world right here in New York City.  
4 So, this new department really is the culmination of  
5 the dreams extending decades. In fact, I would say  
6 that the--the ink wasn't even dry under Mayor Koch's  
7 order establishing the initial Mayor's Office of  
8 Veterans Affairs.

9 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Yeah, well, I-I  
10 think it is quite remarkable, and I tip my hat to you  
11 because in one year you've been able to get this  
12 agency up and running, and you've been able to staff  
13 it with highly trained and competent individuals who  
14 care deeply about veterans who work many more hours  
15 than they're getting paid for. I know that to be  
16 true, and I appreciate it because the 200,000 plus  
17 veterans in the city they're counting on us--

18 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] Yes.

19 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: -- you know to  
20 deliver programming and funding and--and assistance  
21 and--and to do right by them.

22 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing]  
23 Absolutely, Mr. Chair, and our moral, ethical service  
24 oriented imperative is to do right by our New York  
25 City veterans of all eras, and their family members,

2 and as it turns out, just a couple of weeks ago I had  
3 the first teleconference of what will now become a  
4 regular and recurring collaboration between about  
5 eight of our counterparts around the country--

6 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: [interposing] Oh,  
7 wow.

8 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: --and it was so  
9 heartening. As we've started this process of  
10 comparing notes and best practices and figuring out  
11 how we can together really raise the bar to a city.  
12 They all said, Commissioner Sutton, we've got our  
13 eyes on what's going on in New York City.

14 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Wow.

15 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: This is what we  
16 need in our city, and we want to learn from your  
17 success and bring that to our city, our mayor, our  
18 city council, our veteran advocates.

19 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: That's wonderful.

20 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: So it's a chance to  
21 really accelerate and catalyze progress around the  
22 country. We're very, very heartened.

23 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Me-me-there's no  
24 doubt New York is now leading the way again in how we

2 serve and help veterans and it's because of your good  
3 work and the people that work for you.

4 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Well, Mr. Chair, as  
5 we have long agreed, much work has been done, much  
6 work remains, and we'll continue along that journey.

7 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: We're excited about  
8 that. I have one or two other questions, but I'm  
9 going to defer to some of my colleagues because I  
10 know there are other hearings going on  
11 simultaneously, and then we'll come back if you can  
12 just--

13 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] Sure.

14 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: --indulge us for a  
15 little bit. The first question comes from Council  
16 Member Fernando Cabrera.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: Thank you, Mr.  
18 Chair and thank you for all you do for our veterans  
19 and I know you push really hard along side of this  
20 committee to make sure that we have this department  
21 up and running, and Commissioner, I want to thank  
22 you. So as I said before, I mentioned what I'm,  
23 going to mention. Mr. Chairman, I'd like to make a  
24 recommendation, and that is that since we got a  
25 satellite, as I understand now in the Bronx, can we

2 have one of the hearings or—or site visit actually  
3 take place in the Bronx.

4 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: That's a great idea.  
5 I think we'll work with the committee staff. We have  
6 done offsite committee hearings in the past. I think  
7 we did one last year at NYU, which I thought was very  
8 informative, very helpful. Certainly, if we have an  
9 oversight hearing on the operational aspects of DVS  
10 or the satellite officers of DVS post-budget because  
11 we have a lot of work to do now, budget season, but  
12 maybe in the fall we could schedule one and we can  
13 actually do it in the Bronx. Where is the Bronx  
14 Office just so that I understand, the Bronx  
15 satellite?

16 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: So the Bronx  
17 satellite it's in—let me just double check.

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER ROTH: [off mic] The  
19 Bronx County Courthouse.

20 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: The Bronx County  
21 Courthouse.

22 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: So we'll—we'll work  
23 with your office, Commissioner, and the—the  
24 administrative judge there to—we don't want to be  
25 disruptive in any way, but I think to have a hearing



2 there it would probably be a lot of fun, and we can  
3 invite all the veterans in the Bronx to join us for  
4 that as well.

5 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Well, Mr. Chair and  
6 Council Member Cabrera, I think this would be a great  
7 complement to now what's going on with the VAB  
8 meetings that are held in each borough. Most-most  
9 recently I think it was just last week we had our VAB  
10 meeting in Staten Island so we'll be up for  
11 complementing, and just again, making it easier for  
12 veterans and their families and allies across the  
13 city to connect with us to know what's going on and  
14 to give us their ideas.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: So, Commissioner  
16 I want to thank you for coming to Community Board 7  
17 just I think it was a few weeks ago.

18 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Yes.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: It was  
20 tremendous event, well attended in spite of the fact  
21 that we had very, very bad weather and you were there  
22 and I know that the veterans were very happy that you  
23 were there.

24 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: A great event.

2 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: And I'm so glad  
3 that we were able to honor to honor them. I have a-  
4 just a couple of questions, and the first question is  
5 how many, what's the count at this moment in terms of  
6 how many veterans are considered to be homeless in Ne  
7 York City?

8 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: You know, I didn't  
9 check this morning, but as of last week it was about  
10 500, but I'm checking with Nicole Branca, our  
11 Assistant Commissioner and Senior Advisor for Housing  
12 and Support Services. Indeed, that's what it is.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: So just for a  
14 point of clarification, there are only 500 veterans  
15 who are homeless. We're talking about the--they're-  
16 they're in the shelter system right now, but they  
17 don't have permanent housing. So, as I understand  
18 it, please remind of the Mayor last week announced  
19 that he's going to have--provide funding for more--more  
20 veteran units, apartment units. Do you know how many  
21 are--are going to be allocated by chance?

22 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: So the--the  
23 development that was cited last week I believe that's  
24 70, 70 units?

2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER ROTH: [off mic] No,  
3 that's maybe 500.

4 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Oh, well.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: Oh, so 500  
6 units.

7 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: 500 units. Okay,  
8 so better yet. Forget 70, there are 500 units--

9 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: Okay.

10 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: --and we're working  
11 now with HPD and the Administration to develop that  
12 initiative so that it can--it can come online and--and  
13 start working for our veterans.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: Do we have an  
15 anticipation of when those 500 units will be  
16 available? Have you got a notice of that?

17 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: We are willing to  
18 take that for the record and get back to you with  
19 accurate information, but that's--that's a very  
20 exciting development, which is just currently  
21 underway in terms of the planning process. We'll get  
22 back to you with the details.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: My other  
24 questions, and thank you so much for that, my other  
25 question is in regards to have you--have you--have your

2 department conducted recently or let's say in the say  
3 in the last year a survey, a citywide survey to talk  
4 about the needs that veterans are facing at this  
5 moment, the depth of those needs, the intensity of  
6 those needs, how widespread, have priorities changed  
7 regarding needs that were pressing before us five  
8 years ago. Are there any plans? Is that in the  
9 budget, the funding for these studies or were we  
10 going to be relying on somebody else to do it?

11 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: So Council Member  
12 Cabrera, we have not done such a survey. We do,  
13 however, benefit from the work that has been done by  
14 organizations such as the New York City Veterans  
15 Alliance. I believe Kristen Rouse (sic) and members  
16 of her team are here today. That initial policy  
17 report that came out—help me out Kristen. 2015? June  
18 of 2015. It has been very instructive. There are  
19 other veteran service organizations that do regular  
20 surveys. As we come up to our full operational  
21 capacity this is something that we'll be looking at,  
22 but we've started first with laying the foundation  
23 and ground work in terms of our strategic framework.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: And the last  
25 question I have real quickly that the additional

2 Homeless Prevention position, I don't know if you  
3 mentioned that in your—in your briefing statement,  
4 but what's the status of that—of that position moving  
5 forward, and from what I understand, it is included  
6 in the—in the current year budget, but not reflected  
7 in the current plan for Fiscal 2018.

8 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Yes. So there are  
9 several positions that we've identified that we know—  
10 know will help to improve those—those prevention and  
11 peer coordination on the homeless front as well as  
12 we'll improve that Connect NYC so we're currently in  
13 the process of working with the administration. We  
14 look forward to engaging with each of you as well as  
15 we go forward on those important positions.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER CABRERA: Fantastic. I  
17 compliment your work. The work that all your staff  
18 is doing. Mr. Chairman, again, thank you so much and  
19 thank you for your consideration in having the  
20 hearing in the Bronx at the satellite office.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: We—we will follow up  
22 with you to try to make that happen. I would be  
23 remiss if I didn't also add my appreciation to you,  
24 Commissioner, and to the Administration for following  
25 through to end veterans' homelessness in the city.

2 We have made remarkable gains bringing it down to the  
3 single digits really, and that's something I think  
4 that we should all very proud of. We have a lot of  
5 work to do in other areas, and in other and in other  
6 ways, but in that particular area I think we've made  
7 considerable progress.

8 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Thank you, Chair.

9 Can I just brag for a moment--

10 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: [interposing]

11 Please, please.

12 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: --on that. So over  
13 the last five years, as a whole our country has  
14 decreased veteran homelessness by 47%, which is  
15 fantastic. What a noble endeavor. Here in New York  
16 City where as everyone of us well knows, the vacancy  
17 rate for affordable housing is less than 1%. We have  
18 brought that number--we have reduced veteran  
19 homelessness by 90%. History has got its eyes on us,  
20 Mr. Chair, and we're eager to share our wisdom, our  
21 knowledge, our achievements in this regard, and it's  
22 something truly to be very, very proud of all of us.

23 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Well, what--whatever  
24 we're doing, other cities should be doing because one  
25 homeless veteran is one too many, but here in New

2 York I know we've made considerable progress  
3 particularly in the area of chronic homelessness and  
4 dealing with veterans who are not only homeless, but  
5 suffer from some mental health issue or substance  
6 abuse issue. So I know that for those veterans who  
7 have received help because of the funding that's come  
8 from come Washington, we are very appreciative. I  
9 want to turn it over now to Council Member Miller who  
10 has joined us. He's not a member of the committee,  
11 but he might as well be because he's such a strong  
12 advocate for veterans in Southeast Queens.

13 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [laughs] Indeed he  
14 is.

15 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: So thank you for  
16 being here.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MILLER: Thank you, Chair  
18 Ulrich for—for your advocacy and all that you've  
19 done, and it's important to veterans throughout the  
20 city and I know in my district they really appreciate  
21 you. Commissioner, thank you so much for you and—and  
22 your team there, and as I—so as I look at the budget  
23 and—and you have really articulated well your—what  
24 your needs were, and—and the fact that 200—the—the  
25 monies that were not in there had been baselined, and

2 that they had been used on startup and implementation  
3 and—but I—I would be remiss if—if—if we did not talk  
4 about the service of these 200,000 veterans here in  
5 New York City, and to think that the 35 current staff  
6 members as—as—as the Chair said that they are working  
7 long hours. Certainly it is a lot for 35 folks who—  
8 and couldn't, but we—we—we represent that many folks  
9 in our districts. But we have staff and it is  
10 concentrated in one location. You guys have to be  
11 all over the city. How do you do that? How important  
12 is your collaborations with—with other agencies,  
13 community groups, other CBOs?

14 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Well, Chairman,  
15 Council Member Miller, thank you so much for your  
16 leadership. I just have to say I'm—I'm reminded of  
17 our work together with the Hollis Veterans Housing  
18 Initiative and just what a pioneering, groundbreaking  
19 project that has been. I'm so proud to go back and  
20 visit that community today and hear of the successes,  
21 the achievements, the jobs, the training, the  
22 engagement by the community there in Queens with the  
23 libraries, with the—the faith communities. And I  
24 think I heard recently that some of the veteran  
25 residents there even helped to save a life. So



2 again, veterans and their families being of continued  
3 service to others. I would say that's a great  
4 microcosm, Council Member Miller, for our reliance,  
5 our embrace of partners. We are a team of teams.  
6 Yes, it's better to have 35 folks on board than it  
7 was to have four back in June of 2015, but, you know,  
8 we see our goal as being a startup within New York  
9 City government, and we want to retain that mindset,  
10 and we want to always look for ways that we can link  
11 up with others whether they be public, private,  
12 corporate, philanthropic, veteran advocates, partners  
13 all across the city, truly to make it a team of  
14 teams. Now you asked specifically how do we cover  
15 those 150 outreach events. I'll tell you for sure  
16 it's easier today to cover those than it was two  
17 years ago, but we do that through a whole lot of  
18 pluck and grit and just commitment to being there.  
19 There's nothing like being present to witness whether  
20 it's a--an award. I remember Mr. Chair, we have a  
21 chance to--to witness the--the long overdue award for  
22 the veteran in your district whether it be to be  
23 there at the grand opening for an initiative like the  
24 Hollis Veterans Housing Community, whether it be for  
25 example to--to be there during tough times. So at

2 memorial services to be there during commemorations,  
3 celebrations during the Veteran-Veterans Day season  
4 or during times like the upcoming Memorial Day  
5 seasons when we're-we're really reflecting and-and-  
6 and remembering the sacrifices of those to whom we  
7 owe so much. So I-I can't even begin to-you can  
8 perhaps get the notion that I could talk about this  
9 for a while, but you're exactly right. Partnerships  
10 are critical to our ongoing success. That's one of  
11 the reasons why we've brought on board a Director of  
12 Public Private Partnerships, but it's also something  
13 that every single one of us just carries in our DNA  
14 every single day. We are always looking for partners  
15 within government, outside of government, anywhere we  
16 find folks who want to work on behalf of New York  
17 City veterans and their families, we're in.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER MILLER: So, with that  
19 being said, obviously it ahs not been easy, but we-  
20 you-you mentioned specifically that the Hollis  
21 Veterans Housing over there, and we have-there are  
22 still public libraries are on board, and certainly  
23 the-the CBO that is providing the-the housing  
24 services and the other wraparounds that are necessary  
25 have been doing a great job. I think it was most

2 importantly that where the resistant had initially  
3 come from are really on board and the communities are  
4 part of that, and it has become really a template for  
5 how this should be done throughout the city. And I'm  
6 excited about that, but in terms of expertise of  
7 resources I think that we can use a little bit more  
8 of that hands-on technical support, and if we-if-if  
9 there's a way to sometimes like train the trainer,  
10 because I know we have limited resources. Certainly  
11 we have volunteers and-and within the veteran  
12 community that are prepared to help that next  
13 generation of veterans that are in need. So anything  
14 that we can do as a community we want to continued to  
15 be supportive, and I thank you for all your support,  
16 and you-you are certainly holding the line on the  
17 budget because I would think that given your  
18 monumental-monumental tasks that it would require  
19 additional funding, but if you can do it on this  
20 budget then more power to you, and we are here to  
21 assist you. Thank you.

22 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Well, thank you so  
23 much, Council Member.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER MILLER: Thank you for  
25 your services?

2 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Council  
3 Member Miller. Thank you. On the—before we go over  
4 to Council Member Vallone, I have a—a question I  
5 meant to ask earlier. Two questions in particular.  
6 Does DVS plan to submit a section in the 2017 Mayor's  
7 Management Report, MMR. Is—is DVS going to  
8 participate in any way, and what—what can we expect  
9 to see in the future--

10 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] Sure.

11 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: --the MMR that's  
12 about to come out?

13 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: During Year 1 of  
14 our initial year of operation we've already been  
15 engaged with both the Deputy Mayor for Strategic  
16 Initiatives, Deputy Mayor Buery and his team as well  
17 as the Mayor's Office of Operations, our Deputy  
18 Commissioner Jeff Roth has the lead on that work, and  
19 we are in the process of identifying both the  
20 services, the performance goals and outcomes that  
21 will be submitted as part of the MMR process and when  
22 those are complete and ready to go, they will—they  
23 will be submitted. At this time I don't have a  
24 particular date. We're looking at the cycle and  
25 working that with the Administration, but I can

2 assure you we're very excited to be part of the MMR.  
3 That really sort of cements the fact that we're a  
4 real agency here in New York City government

5 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: And I think that's  
6 great and, you know, part of the impetus behind  
7 passing the legislation was that we can hold  
8 everybody accountable that the Council can hold the  
9 administration accountable, that the taxpayers and  
10 the voters and the veterans in the city can hold all  
11 of us accountable for how we serve veterans and how  
12 we spend money on programs for veterans. So we're  
13 really eager to see the MMR. Also, related to an  
14 internal department personnel matter, this issue  
15 comes up and last year we sort of, you know, kicked  
16 the ball down the field a little bit. But we hear  
17 from so many not-for-profits that we are funding  
18 currently, and I was reminded by the Finance staff  
19 earlier that the Council's initiative, which is \$1.3  
20 million, which is great, you know, to support very  
21 good organizations like NYU Langone, like Black  
22 Veterans for Social Justice, like the Bailey House,  
23 like a project renewal and—and NYLAG and legal  
24 services, but that funding current goes through five  
25 different agencies. And what we would really like to

2 see in the upcoming Fiscal Year is a Chief  
3 Contracting Officer is for DVS to become at some  
4 point a contracting agency so that we could fund some  
5 of the larger groups, but also some of the smaller  
6 groups through your agency know that they'll get the  
7 money in a reasonable amount of time. Some of the  
8 groups that I mentioned previously have been waiting  
9 for two Fiscal Years because for whatever reason the  
10 paperwork is still at DYCD even though the Council  
11 appropriated it, and MOCS may have cleared it. You  
12 know, the agency is not able to execute that contract  
13 with those groups in a timely fashion, and we believe  
14 that the veterans agency if it does at some point  
15 become a contracting agency would be able to better  
16 facilitate those contracts more effectively. So we  
17 just want to put that back on the table, and maybe  
18 take a look at that. If it's a funding issue, the  
19 Council is very eager to see how much that might  
20 cost, and maybe that's something that the Council  
21 would be willing to support with the Administration's  
22 help.

23 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: We look forward to  
24 engaging with you during the budget process,  
25 absolutely.

2 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you.

3 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Thank you, Mr.  
4 Chair.

5 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you,  
6 Commissioner. Alright, so Council Member Vallone,  
7 and then we'll wrap up the questioning because we  
8 have some other folks who signed up to testify.  
9 Thank you.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Thank you, Mr.  
11 Chair and yeah, just a quick question. Hi,  
12 Commissioner. How are you?

13 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Very good.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: What a heck of a  
15 year we've had. Hopefully all our years continue  
16 like.

17 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: What a difference a  
18 year makes.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: It really does.

20 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Thank you, Council  
21 Member.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: So I guess prior  
23 to—to you taking over and prior to the creation the  
24 department. You know, we were constantly I guess  
25 looking for information from the other city agencies

2 as to what we were doing for veterans and—and, which  
3 really created the stalwart approach by our—our  
4 agencies and groups with us today that are—they're  
5 always advocating for the veterans. So we passed a  
6 law asking for data to come back to us on all the  
7 different types of services the city was providing  
8 whether it was through—through housing, whether it  
9 was through medical benefits. Now, I just wanted to  
10 get your perspective. So now that we have our  
11 department, have you seen the cooperation from your  
12 sister agencies on providing you the data that you  
13 need because that was something that the Chair and  
14 the rest of the Council Members were continually  
15 plagued by it at hearings where we'd get you the  
16 information. We'll get back to with the information  
17 whether it was oh, trying to get the different  
18 veteran's information, but now it's centralized  
19 really through you and your agency and department.  
20 How have you seen that interaction? Do we need to  
21 still keep pushing other agencies for that veteran  
22 that's home? (sic)

23 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: So Council Member  
24 Vallone, thanks for bringing this up. We are  
25 definitely on a data journey, and I think that the



2 earlier legislation was an important first step. As  
3 we come to fully operational capacity as a new agency  
4 naturally our first and primary focus this first year  
5 has been, you know, hiring our team, building the  
6 team, but, of course, we've also been looking at this  
7 issue of data, and it starts within our city  
8 agencies. It starts with self-identification, and I  
9 think I mentioned in my testimony that we've begun  
10 that dialogue through the Mayor's Office of  
11 Operations, and now incorporating the voices of the  
12 relevant city agencies to determine how we can best  
13 standardize that process. We've started actually  
14 through our work with the Mayor's Office of Criminal  
15 Justice and the Behavioral Health Task Force to  
16 determine that actually the—the best question for—for  
17 getting veterans coming into in this case the  
18 Criminal Justice System. The best way of at least  
19 getting a more accurate depiction of who's a veteran  
20 or who's not is to be more inclusive. We've learned  
21 not only here in New York City but around the country  
22 that if you just ask are you a veteran, that's not  
23 going to get you where you need to go. Some folks  
24 will assumed well if I've never deployed into harm's  
25 way I'm not a veteran. Wels, no, no, no, no, I'm

2 combat roll. I'm a veteran or what. You know  
3 there's all kinds of confusion around that basic  
4 question. So the question that we've come up with  
5 working with the VA as well as the Criminal Justice  
6 System that we are now socializing across city  
7 government is have you ever served in the United  
8 States Armed Forces, National Guard, or Reserves.  
9 And we think that this is going to be a much more  
10 productive way at getting at that question. We've  
11 started with one-one element of the government.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: [interposing]  
13 That's why we vote for the veterans I do fund. (sic)

14 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] And  
15 we've also--

16 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: [interposing]  
17 That was all part of the--

18 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: --we're the first,  
19 we are the first city to have a veteran  
20 identification on our ID card. So that's also been--  
21 we--we look forward to--to building on that as well as  
22 we go forward. You know, the initial--in addition to  
23 all of the city benefits, the cultural activities and  
24 memberships and all of that that apply to every  
25 resident New York for veterans. There's a year free

2 membership to the Intrepid, and I think we've got  
3 some folks from the Intrepid here today who will talk  
4 to us about their programming. It's phenomenal for  
5 our veterans and their families as well as a discount  
6 on the veterans supports, a private program that's  
7 negotiated corporate discounts for veterans and their  
8 families as well as an initial with the Queens  
9 Chamber of Commerce, and we—we really look forward as  
10 we, you know, round up this first year of operations  
11 and go into year 2 to be able to build on that. But  
12 getting back to your initial data question, yes, we  
13 are very much committed to that goal. I don't know  
14 if you have been getting the data reports, the  
15 Mayor's Operation, the Mayor's Office of Operations  
16 puts together in compliance with the legislation, but  
17 those have been very useful, and we'll make sure that  
18 Mr. Chair and members of the committee that those  
19 reports—I know they go to the Speaker's Office, but  
20 certainly we'll make sure. I think we have another  
21 one coming up later this year.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: But just know in  
23 sharing those reports, and the assimilation of those  
24 facts that it turns out that there's an additional  
25 request for staffing and/or budget this committee

2 full-stands fully behind any request to do that. I  
3 think that's—I think when we see the—a budget that  
4 doesn't increase, I—I would think probably on a  
5 yearly basis your needs are just going to grow  
6 exponentially as you require all of these, the  
7 different information and different information and  
8 different veterans that may have been silent before.  
9 I would always like to see growth in a budget so that  
10 we can add onto that, and not have to kind overtax  
11 the existing staff, which is what happens on every  
12 other city agency. The first thing they say is we're  
13 overworked, we're overworked. We want you to be not  
14 at that stage. We want you to constantly grow. So  
15 if there's ever an increase, we will be there to  
16 fight it for you.

17 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Thank you, Council  
18 Member Vallone.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: That's just us.  
20 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, Council  
22 Member Vallone. I also have two recommendations sort  
23 of budget related policy. I would really like to see  
24 at some point in the future the Mayor's Office  
25 spearhead a specific public/private partnership

2 between the people in the city who are very  
3 successful and generous with veteran's causes and the  
4 city of New York to support some of the services that  
5 we provide for not only the formerly homeless  
6 veterans but all veterans' housing needs and other  
7 areas. So I think that's an area where we can set up  
8 a quasi governmental non-profit, if you will, that  
9 the City Council and the Mayor's Office would be able  
10 to contribute to, but also some of our friends in the  
11 private sector, and that could be just to support  
12 some of your outreach and some of your initiatives.  
13 I think there's so much potential in a big city like  
14 New York with all the amount of wealth that we have  
15 here, and we have some very generous people who have  
16 already given to so many worthy causes that we should  
17 try to harness that to work on areas where perhaps  
18 government doesn't—doesn't do it as well on its own.  
19 You know, and sometimes government does things and it  
20 costs more money, and it takes much longer to do or  
21 to build. Maybe if we had a quasi government non-  
22 profit. I don't even know what you would call it,  
23 but something that the Council and the Mayor could  
24 oversee that we could contribute to and also

2 encourage our friends in the private sector to  
3 participate and be supportive as well. So I don't--

4 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: [interposing] We  
5 look forward to unpacking that with you. Thank you,  
6 Mr. Chair.

7 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: And I think that it  
8 is it. We were going to ask you about the VAB, but  
9 we asked enough questions today, and you've been so  
10 generous with your time. I know you're very busy  
11 and--and your staff is here, but again I want to thank  
12 you, Commissioner. This really is history in the  
13 making. You've got in on the ground floor, and  
14 you've been able to in a short amount of time correct  
15 so many deficiencies in the structure of how we're  
16 able to serve veterans that I--I-I think it's--it's a  
17 feather in your cap, but I told the Mayor previously  
18 and I'll say it again today I don't think he could  
19 have picked a better person to be Commissioner of  
20 this agency, and I want to thank you for all that you  
21 do. Thank you.

22 COMMISSIONER SUTTON: Well, thank you so  
23 much, Mr. Chair.

24 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you, and Mr.  
25 Roth, thank you for being here as well. Thank you.

2 Okay. We are now going to hear from the Intrepid  
3 Sea, Air and Space Museum, Barbara Johnson Stemler,  
4 and also on the panel we will hear from the New York  
5 City Veterans Alliance, Kristen Rouse. [pause] Why-  
6 why don't we start with Kristen and then we'll hear  
7 from the Museum. [background noise]

8 KRISTEN ROUSE: Good afternoon. My name  
9 is Kristen Rouse. I served for more than 20 years of  
10 combined service in the United States Army, the Army  
11 Reserve and the New York National Guard, and that  
12 included three tours of duty in Afghanistan. I am  
13 here to testify today on behalf of the New York City  
14 Veterans Alliance, a member supported grassroots  
15 policy advocacy and empowerment organization serving  
16 veterans, service members and their families across  
17 the New York City Metropolitan area. We applaud the  
18 work of the New York City Department of Veteran  
19 Services since its inception and we have heard from  
20 our membership that they are impressed by the new  
21 staff who have been brought on board and the caliber  
22 of work they do. We look forward to the growth and  
23 expansion of DVS' role in ensuring that veterans and  
24 their families are able to connect with the benefits  
25 and services they so richly deserve, but we must be

2 clear that this is only the beginning. As one of our  
3 members recently said at a rally right here on the  
4 steps of City Hall, it is not the time to be  
5 decrease—decrease funding while we are still at work.  
6 New Yorkers are serving right now, right this very  
7 minute on combat missions in the Middle East and  
8 Afghanistan. They aren't even back home yet, and  
9 there is much, much work still to be done to ensure  
10 that they can take full advantage of the services and  
11 benefits they are owed right here in New York City.  
12 My organization offers no direct social services to  
13 veterans, but we regularly refer veterans and family  
14 member so DVS for help, and we also hear back from  
15 individuals who tell us that DVS hasn't been able to  
16 help them yet. Just in the last couple of weeks, we  
17 have heard from a veteran who told us he's been in  
18 the Borden Avenue Homeless Shelter for more than a  
19 year because he can't find a place to use his LINC  
20 voucher. We heard just last week from the widow of a  
21 veteran who is struggling to pay rent and prevent  
22 eviction who told us that DVS couldn't help her  
23 because first she's not yet homeless and second  
24 because her veteran spouse is deceased. DVS needs to  
25 further expand its resources and connectivity with



2 other city agencies and community organizations to  
3 provide more comprehensive help for veterans and  
4 their families including widows and spouses. This is  
5 not time to say enough, and say further growth costs  
6 too much. DVS was created because of the enormity of  
7 the need and the urgency of helping veterans and  
8 their families in New York City, which together  
9 represent 1 in 17 New Yorkers. Funding must go up,  
10 not be reduced. For these reasons we make the  
11 following recommendations for Fiscal Year 2018

12 Budget:

13 1. DVS' budget must increase not  
14 decrease. Last year's budget total, according to our  
15 analysis of the budget was \$2.59 million. We  
16 understand that this—that this included one-time  
17 start-up costs, as has been mentioned, as well as  
18 private grant fund—funding, but as we have stated  
19 publicly, over the last month, it is not acceptable  
20 for our city government to start finding cost savings  
21 in the DVS budget.

22 2. DVS' staffing level must be filled,  
23 and no decreased. We're glad to hear that the  
24 funding level will—will remain at 35 and we—and we

2 strongly urge the—the department to fill those  
3 positions as promptly as possible.

4           3. DVS must provide oversight of the  
5 more than a million dollars that go annually to  
6 community-based organizations. One of the top  
7 recommendations we made in our June 2015 report on  
8 New York City veteran policy was for—was for then  
9 MOVA, now DVS to provide appropriate vetting and  
10 oversight for discretionary funds from the New York  
11 City Council going to community organizations for  
12 veteran services and welfare. We again make this  
13 recommendation. The disparate agencies that have  
14 been tasked with oversight of these funds including  
15 DYCD, SBS, and DOHMH simply do not have the expertise  
16 or holistic view of the New York City Veterans  
17 community that DVS does, and also as we've discussed,  
18 there are organizations that have been waiting  
19 multiple fiscal years to receive the funding that  
20 they've been promised. It is time for DVS to  
21 dedicate time and staffing to this critical oversight  
22 task to ensure that the city's funds are used  
23 appropriately and get to where they need to be to  
24 support and serve our city's veterans and families.

2 4. We take this opportunity to further  
3 urge New York City Council Members to allocate  
4 funding for the Alternative Tax Exemption for veteran  
5 homeowners. School districts across Long Island and  
6 the entire state have recently been approving this  
7 fundamental and long overdue tax exemption to make  
8 housing more affordable for veterans, and it is  
9 absolutely essential that New York City do so as  
10 well. Homeownership is a basic promise of the GI  
11 Bill of Rights for our nation's veterans, which has  
12 been eroded and made nearly impossible for veterans  
13 here in New York City. This tax exemption is just  
14 one step forward that New York City Council can take  
15 toward making housing more attainable and affordable  
16 for the veterans who served our nation and our city.  
17 On behalf of the New York City Veterans Alliance, I  
18 thank you all for the opportunity to testify today.  
19 Pending your questions, this concludes my testimony.

20 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: I will defer  
21 questions until after we hear testimony from the  
22 museum, and then we will have a conversation. Thank  
23 you, Kristen.

24 BARBARA JOHNSON STEMLER: Thank you.  
25 It's an honor to be here today. My name is Barbara

2 Johnson Stemler and I'm the Senior Manager of Access  
3 Programs at the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum.

4 As an educational and cultural non-profit institution  
5 centered on the aircraft carrier, Intrepid, a

6 national historic landmark, the Intrepid Sea, Air and  
7 Space Museum promotes the awareness and understanding

8 of history, science and service through its

9 collection, expeditions and programming in order-in

10 order to honor our heroes, educate the public and

11 inspire our youth. Directly in line with the

12 Department of Veterans Services Whole Health and

13 Community Resilience Initiative, the museum's

14 Veterans Access Initiative offers a series of

15 programs for veterans and their families including

16 veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, veterans

17 with post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury

18 and those who have-who have been recently

19 hospitalized. These programs incorporate objects

20 case learning experiences to create an accessible

21 entry point for veterans encouraging them to have fun

22 to feel comfortable and make creative connections

23 with one another. Intrepid Museum staff members have

24 worked extensively with veterans at the museum, as

25 well with community venues, senior centers and

2 transitional housing sites throughout New York City.

3 From these encounters it is clear that DVS is a

4 powerful advocate and centralizing force for a

5 diffuse group of individuals and their loved ones all

6 with wide ranging needs. The Intrepid Museum relies

7 upon DVS staff members to provide mental health first

8 aid training, programmatic feedback and direct

9 connections to veteran networks. We are proud to be

10 a partner with DVS, and look forward to future

11 collaboration.

12 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Thank you for your

13 testimony, and the good work that you do at the

14 museum. I'm—I was very happy to be a part of the

15 very historic moment when we signed the bill creating

16 the Department of Veterans Services on one of the

17 flight decks of the Intrepid. It was really a very

18 moving and powerful ceremony, and I know that the

19 veterans who were there, some of whom are with us

20 today really remember that as a—as a special moment.

21 So thank you for hosting us that day, and for the

22 good work that you do helping veterans. I'm a big

23 support actually of the Intrepid through the—through

24 the Council CASA Initiative, and think Council Member

25 Vallone is as well sending our young people from

2 public schools and not only class trips to learn  
3 about American history, but to learn about science  
4 and space and, you know, marine biology and all the  
5 wonderful quality educational programming that takes  
6 place there. So, we're very, very proud to be a  
7 supporter on the Council side of the good work that's  
8 done at the Intrepid. If I could address just two  
9 points in the New York City Veterans Alliance  
10 testimony, and we can have a conversation on this.  
11 For clarification, I think the Commissioner did  
12 mention that the initial decrease in the budget that  
13 people associated with being a CARP was OTPS related,  
14 you know, and equipment and such, but that would—the  
15 position that was a part of that would be baselined.  
16 So that hopefully will not result in a decrease, but  
17 the Council will be working with the Administration  
18 to do that, and the—and the Mayor said that we're  
19 restoring that—that money on his own. So, we'll look  
20 for that in the Executive Budget. I'm being reminded  
21 by the Finance staff here. So we're—we're very  
22 pleased with that, but, you know, it's wonderful to  
23 have veterans groups like yourself, and the people  
24 that you represent sort of keeping an eye on all of

2 us, and keeping us honest, and keeping us on toes,  
3 and I think that's--

4 KRISTEN ROUSE: Very good to see that  
5 Councilman.

6 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Yep, well, hopefully  
7 in the Executive--

8 KRISTEN ROUSE: [interposing] Council  
9 looking aside. (sic)

10 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: --in the Executive  
11 Budget so am I. So we're—I mean there will be  
12 another hearing, and by the way, that is the beauty  
13 of having these formal budget hearings is that we can  
14 ask for questions, and the Commissioner has to be  
15 here, and be sworn under oath, and—and present as so  
16 eloquently she does, you know, what the  
17 Administration is doing at the agency to help  
18 veterans. Prior to DVS there was no legal  
19 requirement, and Commissioner Holiday, who's a  
20 wonderful guy and—and really did the—I think gave—  
21 gave the job 110%, he was not really compelled in any  
22 way to be here during the budget season and, quite  
23 frankly, the budget for the Mayor's Office of  
24 Veterans Affairs was whatever the Mayor wanted it to  
25 be. And the Council really had no formal role in

2 that process. So—so aside from setting it up and—and  
3 elevating it as an agency so that we can lead the way  
4 again, I think it was incredibly important that  
5 people feel a sense of accountability, and now we  
6 have that, and we're very grateful for that. And  
7 when you say that the staffing at DVS is should be  
8 increased not decreased, what do you envision  
9 additional staffing doing, or what—what if they were  
10 able to hire more staff, what should they be doing  
11 that they're not already doing?

12 KRISTEN ROUSE: So the—the—obviously the—  
13 the baseline that we talked—that has been talked  
14 about today like we—we're here to see that, you know,  
15 that at capacity for—for, you know, I mean you  
16 probably heard some fantastic people thus far. I've  
17 enjoyed meeting everybody and working with them, but,  
18 you know, every—all those positions need to be filled  
19 going forward, and if there is additional staffing  
20 added the—the need that we're seeing that comes our  
21 way is—is still in—in reaching benefits and services.  
22 And, you know, and not just, you know, who are the  
23 veterans—the—the benefits and services for veterans  
24 based on honorable service, but also leveraging all  
25 of the—all of the—all of the social services that the



2 city can offer to assist veterans with it's through  
3 veterans programs specifically or through other  
4 programs that are offered to—to other New Yorkers  
5 particularly of low income. You know, to—to make  
6 sure that anybody who's calling DVS is able to access  
7 all that the city can offer, and I know that that's—  
8 that's the intent there. Again, I'm, you know,  
9 greatly impressed with—with everybody who's on staff,  
10 but still we're—we're—we're getting some of the—the  
11 more—the folks that are still on the margins, and  
12 who—who are still in need of services. Again, you  
13 know, the—you know, it's—it's impressive all of the  
14 work that's been done particularly for homeless  
15 veterans to—to ensure that they have a place to stay  
16 in—in shelters. You know, 500 or so veterans in  
17 shelters does not mean that they're not homeless. If  
18 you are in a shelter, if you're in homeless shelter,  
19 you are still homeless. You know, I—I talk to folks  
20 on the street, We get phone calls, we get emails,  
21 and, you know, and—and folks waiting many months, and  
22 that's it's—it's—it reflects tremendous work that  
23 that wait time has been shortened. But obviously  
24 it's still—much work needs to be done, and also to

2 ensure that, you know that widows and spouses are—are  
3 able to access the help they need as well to--

4 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: [interposing]  
5 Homelessness survivors.

6 KRISTEN ROUSE: --to stay in their  
7 housing and to, you know, to make it—you know, to  
8 keep them in housing and not just wait 'til they're  
9 homeless to give them access to the benefits for  
10 homeless services. Obviously we—we—we want to  
11 prevent homelessness, you know, and I know that  
12 that's—that's the intent, but I—it—I—I would love for  
13 a day where we don't get phone calls and emails, you  
14 know, of—of distress from people saying, oh, well,  
15 nobody can help me.

16 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: We—we have a bill in  
17 the Council now that's not the subject of today's  
18 hearing, but that would provide a rental subsidy for  
19 low-income veterans who are New York City residents,  
20 but who are having difficulty paying their rent,  
21 getting by. If they don't have 100% disability, the  
22 benefit level—the amount of money that they receive  
23 from the federal government to help them afford to  
24 stay in the homes that they're already in is—is  
25 minimal, and I think that—that should be a discussion

2 in the upcoming fiscal year about how we prevent  
3 veterans from becoming homeless in the future by  
4 helping veterans stay in the homes that they already  
5 have not waiting for them to enter the shelter  
6 system, and it's a very complex conversation, but I  
7 think it's one that everybody will be looking forward  
8 to have next year in the upcoming fiscal year. On-on  
9 the point about staffing, though, what I sort of  
10 think is interesting was how the administration was  
11 able to take people—take individuals who are working  
12 for DHS, the Department of Homeless Services and sort  
13 of bring them under the umbrella of DVS. I think  
14 that was very, very smart, very cost-effective.  
15 There needs to be a lot more of that going on between  
16 other agencies, quite frankly. What I would like to  
17 see in the future is at some point and it may not  
18 require additional money, it might just be a shift in  
19 a budget line or a shift in the structure at DVS, is  
20 for the folks who help veterans with getting jobs  
21 through the SBS Workforce 1 centers to be brought  
22 under the command, if you will, of Commissioner  
23 Sutton. The fact that they answer to their  
24 supervisors and folks at SBS is all well and good,  
25 but we have gotten a lot of complaints from actual

2 veterans who have gone to an SBS Workforce center  
3 looking for a job, and we're not satisfied for  
4 whatever reason with the level of service. I think  
5 that if there was a way for us to bring some of those  
6 people under the command of Commissioner Sutton or to  
7 have DVS provide training, specialty training for  
8 those people at SBS that would be very helpful in the  
9 future if they're not doing that already. I mean  
10 that's not to say that they're not doing that, but  
11 that's one area of concern that we hear from veterans  
12 in the city that say, you know, they have gotten  
13 runaround or they offer me a job that is not  
14 commensurate with my educational background or  
15 military experience, and I think that really the best  
16 way to coordinate all of these programs and  
17 initiatives and services for people looking for jobs,  
18 for formerly homeless veterans, for surviving spouses  
19 would be to bring as much under the umbrella of DVS  
20 as possible. And it may—it may not require more  
21 funding. I mean Commissioner Sutton is probably one  
22 of the few agency heads that doesn't come to the City  
23 Council saying we need more money. So, I'm very  
24 impressed with her—with her level of austerity, and  
25 she's doing so much with the limited resources that

2 she has. If she needed more money, I'm sure she  
3 would ask for it, and the Council would be obliged to  
4 give it to them, but I think trying to bring as much  
5 under their umbrella and under their focus that would  
6 also go a long way to helping some of the folks that  
7 you and I—you and I hear about. I think that wraps  
8 up testimony from—

9 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: [interposing]  
10 Just a quick point, if I could, Chair.

11 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: [interposing] Oh,  
12 put on—put on your microphone. Yeah. (sic)

13 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Kristen and to  
14 all the groups in general and everyone out there.  
15 Just we all will never forget before there was a  
16 department or an agency there was you, and you guys  
17 have always been on the front line for us and for all  
18 the veterans. So thank you, and I think part of the  
19 growth of this committee and as a City we really have  
20 to give thanks to all the work that you did before  
21 there was--

22 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Right.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: --an agency, and  
24 the Chair has—has fought for that and this committee  
25 has fought for that. So I always say thank you.

2 Keep being and doing the work that you do, and I join  
3 with you in thinking as costs of living rise, and  
4 everything else rises to keep staff that we need to  
5 keep, they're going to need raises, they're going to  
6 need additional resources. We're going to need  
7 additional ability to meet the new demands of the  
8 new—our new veterans. We're going to need an  
9 increase in the budget. So I agree with you on that,  
10 and I think we need to meet those demands, and we  
11 should always allocate an increase—a percentage  
12 increase every year just to take into that, and then  
13 we'll fight for what we get.

14 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: But we could have an  
15 offline conversation with Commissioner Sutton and her  
16 staff if there are—if there are personnel services  
17 funding that's required that we'll make sure that the  
18 finance folks are involved, that people are part-time  
19 in the satellite offices, and they want to be full-  
20 time and that requires additional funding. That's  
21 something I think worth, you know, discussing to be—  
22 if there's a way for us to be helpful but, you know,  
23 we're still in the infancy stages, and instead of  
24 just, you know, spending money and throwing it at the  
25 ceiling, you know, the fan and seeing, you know, what

2 sticks, it's very smart that we're sort of growing.  
3 There's no doubt in my mind given the nature of how  
4 city agencies are and the creatures of bureaucracy  
5 that they happen to be that five and ten years from  
6 now there will be more than 35 people. There will be  
7 more than \$4 million in the budget. It's just over  
8 time I think it's going to take place, but I want to  
9 thank you Council Member Vallone.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Here.

11 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: He was a—he was the  
12 prime co-sponsor on the bill that created the agency,  
13 and he has a long and proud—his family is a long and  
14 proud and distinguished history of public service in  
15 this building, and they were always very supportive  
16 of veterans. And if you notice, he always stays 'til  
17 the end. He's like the student in class that stays  
18 after school to get tutoring and help, and--

19 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: My mother was a  
20 teacher.

21 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Your mother was a  
22 teacher. She's—she—I'm sure she's—she's—she's still  
23 a teacher, but it's wonderful to have this hearing,  
24 and to work with my colleagues in a bipartisan way,  
25 and with all the advocates. As Councilman Vallone

2 mentioned I remember when they appointed me to chair  
3 the Veterans Committee I showed up to the 16th Floor  
4 at 250 Broadway, and there were five people in the  
5 room and that was it, and it was Kristen Rouse, Joe  
6 Bello and Daniels. Who were the other two?

7 MALE SPEAKER: [off mic] Me and you.

8 CHAIRPERSON ULRICH: Me and you probably,  
9 [laughter] but there were literally five people in  
10 the room. There was no agency, no oversight, no  
11 accountability. I think the morale was, you know,  
12 was in the gutter, and we said this is ridiculous.  
13 They gave us lemonades, we're going to make—well,  
14 they gave us lemons. We're going to make lemonade  
15 and here we are, and some of us are still here. Ed  
16 is with the Lord now, but we're very blessed to have  
17 some of the advocates who are still with us fighting  
18 for veterans, and five years ago we didn't think we'd  
19 even be having these conversations, you know, about  
20 are we going to have 35 people or 36 people. We're  
21 lucky we have five people in this. Anyway, that's my  
22 spiel for the day. Thank you all for coming.  
23 Today's hearing is adjourned, and we will see you at  
24 the Executive Budget hearing. Thank you. [gavel]



1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date March 29, 2017