

Committee on Veterans
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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Hon. Chaim Deutsch, Chair

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OVERSIGHT: Needs of Veterans During COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

On October 19, 2020, the Committee on Veterans, chaired by Council Member Chaim Deutsch, will hold an oversight hearing on the needs of veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee will examine how the Department of Veterans Services (DVS) has adapted to the needs of veterans during since the official statewide COVID shut down in March of 2020, the lessons it has learned, and the new operational goals the agency has to improve upon to ensure that all veterans in New York City (NYC) are adequately served. Those invited to testify include DVS representatives, veteran advocacy groups, and veterans residing in the metropolitan area.

VETERAN DEMOGRAPHICS

Approximately 20 million veterans are currently living in the United States, of which 839,000 reside in New York State.^{1 2} The NYC metropolitan area is home to over one million service members, veterans, and their families.³ NYC veterans are distributed throughout the city as follows: 58,815 (27.9% of total) in Queens, 54,178 (25.7%) in Brooklyn, 38,577 (18.3%) in Manhattan, 37,495 (17.9%) in the Bronx, and 21,502 (10.2%) in Staten Island.⁴ DVS estimates there to be 189,808 service members on active duty and 21,000 National Guard and reservists within NYC.⁵ Of the total 210,808 NYC veterans, 6.5% are female, with the total racial makeup of all NYC veterans being: 59% white, 28% black, 3% Asian, 2% two or more races, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native.⁶ In addition, 88.1% of NYC veterans are employed, with their

¹ United States Department of Veterans Affairs. National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. Veteran Population. *The Nation-Age/Gender*. Available at: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

² United States Department of Veterans Affairs. National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. Veteran Population. *The States-Age/Gender*. Available at: [_](#)

³ New York City Department of Veterans' Services. About. NYC Veterans. *Facts & Stats*. Available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/veterans/about/facts-stats.page>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ New York City Department of Veterans' Services. About. NYC Veterans. *Facts & Stats*. *New York City Veterans Demographics*. Available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/veterans/about/facts-stats.page>.

median income being \$34,794 for females and \$36,582 for males, with 10.1% of veterans living below the poverty line.⁷

VETERANS & COVID-19

In late 2019 and early 2020, the novel COVID-19 virus, also referred to as coronavirus disease 2019, began to spread rapidly worldwide, causing over two hundred thousand deaths and nearly eight million reported cases in the U.S. alone.⁸ In addition to the pandemic's pervasive health effects, necessary efforts to limit the virus' spread have also resulted in a sharp economic slowdown, increasing unemployment, food and housing insecurity, and other forms of economic hardship for many across the country.⁹

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.), the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the national veterans' community in much the same way as it has the broader population, resulting in numerous COVID-19 infections and deaths¹⁰. In June of 2020, the V.A. cited at least 20,000 known cases of COVID-19 among veterans since the nationwide crisis began.¹¹ However, most aspects of the toll and reach of the virus in relation to veterans in the New York City area remain unknown.

The veteran population may be particularly at risk of suffering the health effects of the virus. According to the NYC Veterans Alliance, roughly 82% of NYC veterans are at or near the age of 50, and two-thirds of veterans in the NYC area served during eras spanning World War II,

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Center for Disease Control. Case Trends. Cases and Deaths by State. *United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State*. Available at: https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesinlast7days.

⁹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Research. Poverty and Inequality. *Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships*. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>

¹⁰U.S. Department of Veterans. *COVID-19 National Summary – VA Access to Care*. Available at: <https://www.accesstocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19NationalSummary>

¹¹ Grim COVID-19 milestones for Veterans Affairs: 20,000 cases, 1,500 . Available at: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/06/26/grim-coronavirus-milestones-for-veterans-affairs-20000-cases-1500-deaths-in-the-last-100-days/>

Korea, and Vietnam.¹² Given that the COVID-19 virus is especially harmful to older populations, the high number of elderly or aging veterans indicates that veterans may be particularly susceptible to the virus.¹³ In addition, the intersection between veteran status and disability, as well as the prevalence of comorbidities among veterans, is well documented.¹⁴¹⁵ In its March 2020 COVID-19 response plan, the Office of Emergency Management within the Veterans Health Administration cited an aging veteran population with multiple comorbidity diagnoses, including respiratory concerns, heart disease, and diabetes as underlying factors in its risk assessment for Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS).¹⁶ Persons with preexisting conditions such as cancer or heart conditions have higher chances of contracting COVID-19, and also report more severe cases of the virus than those without these conditions.¹⁷

Veterans may also be particularly vulnerable to the economic effects caused by the pandemic.¹⁸ Veterans are subject to many of the same housing and healthcare disparities as their non-service member neighbors, albeit with the additional burden of navigating an often-

¹² NYC Veterans Alliance. Home. Advocacy. Our Latest. *Report: Integrating Aging Veterans Into NYC Services*. Available at:

https://www.nycveteransalliance.org/integrating_aging_veterans#:~:text=Aging%20NYC%20Veterans%20Populati on.,II%2C%20Korea%2C%20and%20Vietnam.&text=%5B1%5D%20This%20means%20that%20at,over%20the%20age%20of%2050.

¹³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Your Health. COVID-19. People at Increased Risk. *Older Adults*. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html#:~:text=Among%20adults%2C%20the%20risk%20for,or%20they%20may%20even%20die.>

¹⁴ Lynn H. Gerber, MD, Ali A. Weinstein, PhD, Cara L. Frankenfeld, PhD, Minh Huynh, PhD, Disability Among Veterans: Analysis of the National Survey of Veterans (1997–2001), *Military Medicine*, Volume 181, Issue 3, March 2016, Pages 219–226, <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00694>

¹⁵ Trivedi RB, Post EP, Sun H, et al. Prevalence, Comorbidity, and Prognosis of Mental Health Among US Veterans. *Am J Public Health*. 2015;105(12):2564-2569. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2015.302836

¹⁶ Veterans Health Administration, Office of Emergency Management. *COVID-19 Response Plan*. March 23, 2020. Available at: https://www.va.gov/opa/docs/VHA_COVID_19_03232020_vF_1.pdf

¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Your Health. COVID-19. *Evidence Used to Update The List of Underlying Medical Conditions That Increase a Person's Risk of Severe Illness from COVID-19*. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/evidence-table.html>

¹⁸ Rajeev Ramchand, Margaret C. Harrell, Nancy Berglass, and Marshall Lauck. *Veterans and COVID-19: Projecting the Economic, Social, and Mental Health Needs of America's Veterans*. The Bob Woodruff Foundation. Available at: https://bobwoodrufffoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BWF_WhitePaper-COVID19-5.0-Final.pdf

complicated network of services and providers.¹⁹ Finally, homelessness is another issue that may exacerbate the pandemic's economic effect within the veteran populations, as the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans reports that about 1.4 million veterans are currently considered at risk of homelessness or live in substandard housing.²⁰

VETERAN SERVICES IN NEW YORK CITY DURING COVID-19

During the pandemic, DVS has introduced two key programs—the Veterans Voices Project (VVP) and Mission: VetCheck—aimed at veteran outreach, and has also begun releasing a weekly newsletter with information pertaining to the pandemic and relevant to the veteran community.²¹ DVS has also moved its funeral services, housing support services, and constituent services online, and has had to suspend sponsored events, in-person support at Veterans Resource Centers, and the usage of Veteran Peer Coordinators at City shelters. A primary aim of this hearing is for DVS to provide further information as to how the pandemic has affected DVS' operations, including operational details on first several months of VVP and Mission: VetCheck have progressed.

In April, DVS announced the Veterans Voices Project (VVP), through which the department collects oral history related to New York City veterans. The program is intended to provide veterans with a chance to connect with the broader veteran community during the COVID-19 crisis.²² VVP connects veterans over the telephone with program staff to record stories and personal anecdotes related to military service. If participants choose, their stories are sent to the

¹⁹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; Health and Medicine Division; Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice; Committee on Community-Based Solutions to Promote Health Equity in the United States; Baciu A, Negussie Y, Geller A, et al., editors. *Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2017 Jan 11. 2, The State of Health Disparities in the United States. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425844/>

²⁰ National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. *FAQ*. Available at: http://www.nchv.org/index.php/connect/story/faq_knowledge

²¹ NYC Department of Veterans' Services. *COVID-19*. Available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/veterans/covid-19/covid-19.page>

²² New York City Department of Veterans' Services. *Veterans Voices Project (VVP)*. Available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/veterans/downloads/pdf/veterans-voices-project.pdf>

Library of Congress and the New York State Veterans Oral History Project. Select stories may also be featured in unique ways on DVS digital media and on Memorial Day & Veterans Day 2020.

DVS also introduced the Mission: VetCheck initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, through which volunteer veterans make supportive calls to other veterans in the New York City metropolitan area.²³ VetCheck calls aim to decrease social isolation within the veteran community during the pandemic, as well as provide information on how to connect with available resources and services.²⁴ Volunteer callers are trained by the VetCheck team on how to best provide those whom they call with appropriate resources and support, and these calls can be requested either for oneself or for a fellow veteran.²⁵

CONCLUSION

Today's hearing will provide an opportunity for DVS, veteran advocates, and other interested stakeholders to provide feedback back on how the department has continued to bridge the gap between our veterans' community and much-needed services and resources during this most critical time. Concurrently, this feedback and input from vested and informed members of the veterans' community will allow the City to gain crucial information as to how it can best serve its veteran constituents.

²³ Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC. *Mission: VetCheck*. Available at: <https://thrivenyc.cityofnewyork.us/mission-vetcheck>.

²⁴ Kayla Simas. Silive.com. May 24, 2020. *NYC Offers Support to Veterans During COVID-19*. Available at: <https://www.silive.com/news/2020/05/nyc-offers-support-to-veterans-during-covid-19.html>

²⁵ *Id.*