

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

----- X

October 19, 2020
Start: 1:00 p.m.
Recess: 3:28 p.m.

HELD AT: Remote Hearing

B E F O R E: Chaim M. Deutsch
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Chaim M. Deutsch
Alicka Ampry-Samuel
Mathieu Eugene
Alan N. Maisel
Paul Vallone

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

James Hendon
Commissioner
Department of Veterans' Services

Cass Alvarez
Associate Commissioner
Department of Veterans' Services

Allison Messina

Ashton Stewart

Ryan Foley

Peter Kempner

Avi Gross

Tawaki Komatsu

@

1
2 SERGEANT AT ARMS LUGO: Will all
3 sergeants please start your recordings. Sergeant
4 Martinez, you may begin with your opening statement.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS MARTINEZ: Good
6 afternoon and welcome to today's remote New York City
7 Council hearing of the Committee on Veterans. At
8 this time would all panelists please turn on their
9 video. To minimize disruption, please place
10 electronic devices on vibrate or to silent mode. If
11 you wish to submit testimony you may do so at
12 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Once again, that's
13 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Thank you for your
14 cooperation. We are ready to begin.

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you. Ah,
16 great to see everyone. Good morning, my name Council
17 Member Chaim Deutsch, chair of the Committee on
18 Veterans. And I would like to welcome everyone to
19 today's virtual oversight hearing on veterans' needs
20 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ah, the veterans'
21 community faces the same issues as the broader
22 community in the midst of this difficult time, ah,
23 though with additional burdens that many in the
24 general population do not face. Like many New
25 Yorkers, veterans must grapple with heightened

1
2 concerns surrounding housing, food insecurity, and
3 effects of social isolation, as well as the health
4 concerns posed by the virus itself. However, they
5 also deal with numerous conditions resulting from
6 their service, particular conditions that may
7 increase the risk of contracting COVID-19 and having
8 to navigate a complicated network of service
9 providers. Ah, today we will seek, ah, to gain
10 clarity regarding the Department of Veterans
11 Services, ongoing work, and probe for specific
12 information related to the department's, ah,
13 operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. And as the
14 central connector between city services and our
15 veterans' community DVS serves as a critical role in
16 directing, um, our former service members to much-
17 needed resources and support systems. It is thus
18 essential for us to gain a thorough understanding of
19 exactly how it is filling this role in servicing our
20 veterans to that we might work together in the common
21 interest of being served, ah, serving the veterans in
22 the greater New York City area. Ah, the committee
23 thanks the administration, um, advocates, and
24 stakeholders for being present and testifying today,
25 and we hope to hear from both sides on these issues

1
2 to improve them and to best serve and protect our
3 veterans. And I would like to acknowledge and
4 welcome, um, any of my colleagues. Hold on one
5 second. OK, any of my colleagues on?

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Mr. Chair, if you
7 could just hold for one moment, we've got a little
8 issue with the recording. Ah, we're just gonna get
9 the, ah, backup going.

10 SERGEANT AT ARMS: OK, sorry for that.
11 We're good to go.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Apologies.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Any of my
14 colleagues on, 'cause I can't see the full screen.
15 Hold on. Oh, we have Council Member Alan Maisel, ah,
16 who is with us, Council Member Ampry-Samuel, Alicka
17 Ampry-Samuel, I think that is who we have here so
18 far. I'd like to thank my staff, ah, Tovid Jasimov,
19 my deputy chief of staff, ah, Joe Bello, my director
20 of veterans affairs, and I would also like to thank
21 the committee and staff, ah, the committee, ah, staff
22 who helped prepare for this hearing, Ismail Sharif
23 and Thomas May. The counsel will now administer the
24 oath. Counsel? I can't, I think he's muted.

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS 7

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ah, thank you, Chair

3 Deutsch. I'm Ishmail Sharif, counsel to the Veterans

4 Committee of the New York City Council. I will be

5 moderating today's hearing. Before we begin I want

6 to remind everyone that you will be on mute until you

7 are called on to testify, when you will be unmuted by

8 the host. I'll be calling on panelists to testify.

9 Please listen for your name to be called. I will be

10 periodically announcing who the next panelist will

11 be. The first three panelists will be members of the

12 administration, DVS Commissioner James Hendon, with

13 Vincent Garcia, intergovernmental affairs director,

14 and Quamid Francis, deputy chief of staff, present

15 for questions. I will call you when it is your turn

16 to speak. During the hearing if council members

17 would like to ask question, please use the raise hand

18 function in Zoom and I will call you in the order we

19 will, ah, we will be limiting council members'

20 questions to five minutes, including answers. Please

21 also note that for ease of this virtual hearing we

22 will not be allowing a second round of questions.

23 Thank you. I will now administer the oath. Do you

24 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and

25 nothing but the truth before the committee and to

2 respond honestly to CM questions? Ah, we will go by
3 each member of DVS, starting with James Hendon,
4 commissioner.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Vincent Garcia.

7 DIRECTOR GARCIA: I do, yes, sir.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Quamid Francis.

9 DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FRANCIS: I do.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, you
11 may begin when ready, Chair. Oh, excuse me. You may
12 begin when ready, ah, Administration. Thank you.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm sorry. Ismail,
14 ah, do we also need to swear in, ah, our associate
15 commissioner, Cassandra Alvarez?

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I actually didn't get
17 Cassandra Alvarez as of this morning, but we can
18 swear her in as well. Is she going to be testifying
19 today?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes, she is, yes,
21 she [inaudible].

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Is she also on the
23 Zoom?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes, she is.
25

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: OK. Cassandra, do
3 you swear or affirm to tell the whole truth, nothing
4 but the truth?

5 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: I do.
6 Thank you.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much,
9 um, Ishmail. Good afternoon, Chairman Deutsch,
10 committee members, and advocates. Before I begin,
11 I'd like to recognize the more than 215,000 lives
12 that we've lost in our city, state, and country due
13 to the pandemic. It has been an unprecedented and
14 challenging year in New York City. But for those
15 veterans in attendance, I would like to say that our
16 agency stands ready to serve you in your time of
17 need. My name is James Hendon. I am proud to serve
18 as the commissioner for the New York City Department
19 of Veterans Services. I'm joined today by Cassandra
20 Alvarez, our associate commissioner for policy and
21 strategic partnerships, and Quamid Francis, our
22 deputy chief of staff. I welcome this opportunity to
23 testify about VetConnectNYC, food insecurity, V.A.
24 Claims, employment, housing assistance, and our
25 COVID-19 response. Following my testimony I welcome

1 all questions the you may have. Now, when the
2 pandemic first struck the city in March and our, our
3 new reality set in, DVS, like other agencies, began
4 working from home to protect its staff and
5 constituents. Ah, through those first tumultuous
6 days DVS staff continued answering phone calls,
7 communicating with constituents, and providing
8 benefits and services. Despite not knowing whether
9 the pandemic would last for weeks, months, or even
10 years, DVS began developing a proactive plan to
11 continue providing the highest quality of care to our
12 constituents, understanding that the demand for our
13 services would be in greater need than ever. We
14 deployed our Continuation of Operations Plan on March
15 16, mandating all staff to perform their duties from
16 the safety of their homes, limiting external work to
17 essential appointments, and duties that otherwise
18 could not be done remotely. The Continuation of
19 Operations Plan, or the COOP Plan, would also serve
20 as our blueprint to create new and innovative
21 approaches that address the specific needs arising
22 from or exacerbated by the crisis, such as housing,
23 food insecurity, and employment assistance. The
24 transition from military to civilian that veterans
25

1 undergo can be isolating, challenging, and can take a
2 lifetime. This can lead to a veteran's experiencing
3 profound social isolation, even prior to the COVID-19
4 crisis. Mission VetCheck is a collaboration between
5 DVS, Thrive NYC, and veteran service organizations,
6 ah, veteran serving organizations, including the New
7 York National Guaranteed and The Mission Continues.
8 This initiative was developed to help reduce social
9 isolation for veterans and is addressing veterans'
10 needs during the pandemic. VetCheck is designed to
11 offer New York City's veterans support and connection
12 to the veteran community during this crisis, as well
13 as immediate information about essential public
14 services, including free meals, COVID-19 test site
15 locations, and mental health resources. VetCheck
16 trains volunteers from New York City's veteran
17 community to make compassionate check-in calls to
18 other veterans. Training is delivered by DVS and
19 Thrive NYC and volunteer management is overseen and
20 conducted by NYC Cares. Since April 23 through
21 Mission VetCheck DVS has placed over 17,000 calls to
22 New York City veterans, resulting in about 630
23 referrals to DVS. When a caller is unable to assist
24 a veteran directly, their issue is automatically
25

1 testified to a service request for our agency. These
2 referrals range from mental health support, V.A.
3 Claims, food and employment insecurity, and financial
4 assistance with an average completion time within 48
5 hours. Veterans can also be referred to DVS for
6 additional resources and support, such as housing,
7 benefits, or healthcare needs. Despite these
8 uncertain times, Mission VetCheck serves as outlet to
9 inform, empower, and bond our community together
10 throughout the pandemic. One of the largest concerns
11 facing New Yorkers during the pandemic is food
12 insecurity. To act to address this need, DVS has
13 partnered with GetFoodNYC to ensure that our veteran
14 populations are able to access all the avenues
15 through which the city is providing food assistance
16 to New Yorkers. To support these efforts DVS
17 coordinators receive training and certification as
18 GetFood authorized enrollers and are assisting
19 veterans in navigating the requirements of this
20 program to get food. Veterans can independently or
21 through one of our DVS coordinators submit a food
22 request once every three days, or two weeks for
23 recurring orders. Our work to address food
24 insecurity goes well beyond GetFoodNYC. Our outreach
25

1 and strategic partnership teams were able to direct
2 food assistance, food resources, to veterans in need
3 through close collaboration with valued community
4 partners. Through our relationship with the Bob
5 Woodruff Foundation DVS worked with Italians Feed
6 America, an organization founded by celebrity chef
7 Clarisio Pucchini to deliver \$10,000 worth of cooking
8 ingredients to veteran food pantries in Queens.
9 Further, in connection with the New York State
10 Division for Veteran Services and the Campaign
11 Against Hunger, DVS staff and a core of dedicated
12 volunteers were able to provide meals to veterans
13 across the five boroughs. Collectively, these
14 organizations are working together to distribute 350
15 to 400 Hello Fresh food kits to veteran households
16 per week through the end of the year. To date 10,000
17 meals have been provided directly to veterans through
18 this partnership. Further, in addition to the Hello
19 Fresh initiative DVS is also actively engaged with
20 the Bronx Food Initiative to deliver meals to
21 constituents. Through this collaboration DVS has
22 been able to distribute 3100 meal boxes, comprising
23 of 12,400 meals. As we continue to develop internal
24 programs and initiatives DVS looks forward to
25

1 continue to collaborate with outside organizations to
2 combat food insecurity facing our constituents. I
3 just want to clarify one thing here. It's 350 to 400
4 GetFoodNYC meals that are being delivered. It's
5 approximately 2000 Hello Fresh food meal bags being
6 delivered, and it's approximately 1200 food boxes
7 being delivered from the Bronx. So 350 to 400 for
8 GetFoodNYC, approximately 2000 bags coming out of
9 Brooklyn, and 1200 boxes coming out of the Bronx.
10 Switching on to Vet Connect, on October 1
11 VetConnectNYC entered its next chapter as we
12 transitioned this program to the agency internally,
13 resulting in an in-house model of providing care
14 coordination services. We have established a care
15 coordination center within DVS, which we are certain
16 will result in improved efficiency, direct connection
17 with community, and cost savings. Throughout the
18 number of hearings we've had on this subject, it was
19 no surprise that VetConnectNYC has had a positive
20 impact on veterans' lives. It provided a one-stop-
21 shop for veterans seeking assistance for a number of
22 services. In fact, as we are all aware, a veteran
23 often comes in for a single issue and through
24 examination of such an issue several others are
25

1 identified. Further, VetConnectNYC has served as a
2 resources that bridges the divide looking for a
3 service and knowing where to go. However, a common
4 goal that our nonprofit partners and constituents
5 share was efficiency and connectivity. The portal
6 had become difficult to navigate and understand which
7 services were still accepting clients and which were
8 unable to. In addition, organizational restructuring
9 at DVS created an opportunity for our outreach team
10 to directly engage and service our community through
11 this care coordination work. In coordination with
12 Northwell Health DVS outreach and engagement staff
13 became trained in the care coordination center's
14 operation. Through this collaboration with Northwell
15 DVS can maintain the excellent level of care provided
16 by Northwell while addressing the concerns brought by
17 constituents, nonprofits, and our agency alike. This
18 adjustment will also improve our agency's access to
19 system data, enabling us to analyze community needs
20 and identify service trends in real time so we can
21 respond and plan as necessary. As we bring
22 VetConnect in house five DVS employees and one
23 supervisor will staff the care coordination center.
24 This transformation will allow DVS to provide
25

1 additional services for constituents, address and
2 prioritize requests on a more reasonable basis,
3 collect data to improve services, and decrease the
4 program's overall cost to taxpayers. In achieving
5 this change we thank the number of nonprofits who
6 have testified on the issue, the council, and of
7 course DVS staff. We're grateful for the dexterity,
8 expertise, and empathy these staff members have shown
9 to New York City veterans. We look forward to
10 maintaining the care and attentiveness veterans have
11 come to expect when using the Vet Connect NYC
12 platform. Consistent with our goal of knowing where
13 our veterans are at all times, DVS undertook an
14 active wellness check on top of our existing efforts
15 towards recently sheltered veterans. With over 900
16 veterans sheltered since the start of our agency, DVS
17 has reached out to each veteran to provide a personal
18 touch and check-in with some of our most vulnerable
19 constituents. To accomplish this initiative, DVS
20 staff members made phone calls to all formerly
21 homeless veterans that were placed with DVS
22 assistance since 2015 for a check-in. Through these
23 check-in calls DVS's housing staff informed these
24 veterans about services and benefits for which they
25

1
2 may be eligible due to the pandemic, such as
3 supportive services for veteran families, rental
4 assistance, and the HCR New York State Rent Relief
5 Open Application Time, all of which providing, all
6 the time providing a positive and supportive
7 environment to listen and assist. Because DVS
8 understands that the pandemic is creating greater
9 housing insecurity we have been actively housing
10 homeless veterans throughout this pandemic to ensure
11 that our veterans are in safe, secure housing. While
12 our veteran peer coordinators, or VPCs, are no longer
13 in city shelters they continue to house veterans.
14 Housing viewings and interviews were shifted to
15 virtual modes. Videos of available units were shared
16 and management companies opted to complete phone or
17 video call interviews with potential veteran
18 applicants. When necessary, and virtual options were
19 not sufficient, the VPCs have continued to conduct
20 inspection of units, pick up and drop off
21 documentation, and assist with veterans [inaudible].
22 Over 40, with over 40 new HUD-VASH continuum vouchers
23 issued since the start of this year DVS has housed 65
24 veterans since March 2020. Further, we continue to
25 partner and refer veterans for any units that turn

1 over and/or become available in the Serve Vets
2 property which opened in Brooklyn in July of 2019.
3 Despite the ongoing pandemic DVS was able to house
4 183 veterans in fiscal year 2020, an increase of
5 approximately 18%. However, directly referring
6 veterans into supportive housing is just one piece of
7 the puzzle. To assist in the successful transition
8 from the shelter to new housing, also known as
9 aftercare, all veterans who were successfully,
10 successfully housed through the HUD-VASH continuum
11 program are referred to a partner organization, Help
12 USA's Veterans Aftercare Program, to receive case
13 management for a critical period of time, the six
14 months after they are housed. Referrals are made
15 once a veteran has been linked to housing and is
16 approaching a move from shelter. Since going remote
17 on March 17, 2020, DVS has referred 55 veterans to
18 help veterans, to the Help USA Veterans Aftercare
19 Program, thereby ensuring that more veterans are
20 receiving HUD-VASH continuum vouchers, supporting and
21 protecting our veterans. As we continue to partner
22 and work with the four New York City grantees for
23 supportive services for veteran families, that is
24 Help USA Jericho Project, services for the
25

underserved and Volunteers of America. As we continue to work with these partners for veterans who are at risk of losing their housing due to various reasons, DVS will continue to inform, empower, and educate our constituency on the number of services and benefits that they may be eligible for through social media, the DVS newsletter, and other communication platforms. Approximately 6692 veterans living in New York City are eligible for but do not receive their V.A. benefits. To alleviate this issue DVS undertook a proactive approach in creating the agency's V.A. Claims team. First launched on July 5, the DVS claims team consists of a group of four staff members who assist and file a claim on behalf of eligible veterans seeking an earned benefit such as education, survivorship, or disability. As of October 16 DVS has received 76 inquiries, held 37 appointments, and have 10 claims submissions, the vast majority of which involve a claim of disability. Through our outreach efforts DVS continues to see a significant need for the program. Promoted throughout our social media and weekly newsletter channels, DVS also took the unique opportunity to include this information through our Mission VetCheck

1 Initiative while current claims are waiting approval
2 from the V.A. We anticipate that this program is in
3 full swing to return an average \$272,222 per month to
4 recipients and their families. These additional
5 funds can assist any eligible veteran, but can also
6 serve as a crucial assistance to financial security
7 during these troubling times. There's no question
8 that COVID-19 has impacted both the health and
9 economic well-being of New Yorkers unlike anything
10 we've seen before. As DVS continues to develop and
11 implement initiatives to address these [inaudible]
12 we've leveraged our external partnerships with the
13 private sector to bridge access to crucial resources.
14 Over Memorial Day the GI Bill Fund launched the
15 Empire Vets Job Board to help connect veterans with
16 jobs during the COVID-19 crisis in industries that
17 are still hiring despite the pandemic. Since
18 launching the portal has posted over 5000 positions
19 across all types of industry and engaged over 4000
20 new users. The Empire Vets Job Board will be
21 accessible to the public through the end of the year,
22 with the aim of assisting our constituency in finding
23 gainful employment that leverages their military
24 skills through these unprecedented times. We
25

1 encourage the members of the committee to learn more
2 about visiting empirevets.com. Our outreach team
3 also remains well versed in a number of other
4 employment resources and through our existing
5 relationships, especially in the new VetConnectNYC
6 in-house care coordination center model, where DVS is
7 able to connect job-seeking veterans to providers
8 such as Work Force One, American Works, and Institute
9 for Career Development, just to name a few. Earlier
10 this summer one of our outreach team members even
11 helped a veteran with his resume by providing direct
12 guidance and support when this person needed it the
13 most. This example explains, displays the ongoing
14 commitment of our team, that our team has to serving
15 our community, no matter what it takes. As the
16 unemployment situation in New York City continues to
17 evolve DVS stands ready to help and guide our
18 veterans in need. The health and safety of New York
19 City's veterans is of utmost important to us and I'm
20 proud to share that the DVS team has distributed over
21 35,000 reusable face masks throughout our committee,
22 community, thanks to a generous donation from the
23 Boomer Naturals Company. Masks were provided to all
24 four V.A. hospitals, vet centers, veteran nursing
25

1 homes, supportive housing facilities, veteran
2 homeless shelters, and veteran service organizations.

3 To date DVS has worked with 58 different
4 organizations to ensure these masks made their way
5 into our community. In addition, we ensured each
6 mask was distributed with printed materials from DVS
7 in the city promoting V.A. claim services, food
8 assistance, our newsletter, our oral history
9 initiative or the Veteran Voices Project, and of
10 course the city's test and trace program. Ah, simply
11 put, data drives our operation. Since I've had the
12 honor of assuming the role of commissioner DVS has
13 undertaken a robust detailed and active data
14 collection approach through various efforts. For
15 example, DVS has gathered additional information on
16 New York City's employees who are veterans, those
17 receiving tax benefits through the city, those who
18 have an IDNYC card, and those serving as principals
19 and administrators in education. And in addition DVS
20 is in receipt of the return on names and addresses
21 list which provides DVS with the names and addresses
22 of every veteran who returned from military service
23 to New York City in 2019 and those returning after
24 that quarterly. We anticipate this list to provide
25

1 750 to 1000 names per year. Further, in conjunction
2 with the ROAN list, DVS also received all veterans'
3 information receiving V.A. benefits in New York City
4 and the corresponding codes associated with the
5 benefit they are receiving. We anticipate this list
6 to number in the tens of thousands of names and
7 information. Through our communications team DVS has
8 actively built a robust social media and newsletter
9 following. DVS has also increased its engagement
10 with our constituency through our sit rep podcast
11 detailing various New York City veterans' stories.
12 Since the beginning of the year our traditional
13 social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter,
14 have seen a 20% increase in followers compared to
15 last year. Additionally, our social media post
16 exposure increased exponentially through April,
17 hitting a peak of 199,200 impressions between April
18 and May. Through these metrics our agency has been
19 able to reach more veterans and provide greater
20 services than ever before. Through our newsletter
21 DVS provides COVID and programmatic information every
22 week. These updates includes programs and services
23 such as Mission VetCheck, V.A. Claims, and the
24 Veterans' Voices Project, COVID testing locations,
25

1 and advocating for our constituents to fill out the
2 census, and, as always, information how to best reach
3 our agency. Ah, since the pandemic DVS has seen an
4 increase in our open rate to 11.4%, approximately 50%
5 increase from last year, and that is the open rate
6 for the communication that we're sending out as far
7 as our newsletter. These collective efforts have
8 enabled DVS to better understand, track, and
9 communicate with our constituency whether they are an
10 individual living in Brooklyn or a New York City
11 employee. As we continue to discover innovative ways
12 to better reach our constituents we look forward to
13 informing and providing services to more New York
14 City veterans. In conclusion, as we navigate the
15 challenges presented by the pandemic and beyond, DVS
16 will continue to build out and provide quality
17 services and information to New York City, to New
18 York City's veteran community, whether it is
19 providing essential services, such as housing and
20 benefit navigations, or through new programs and
21 initiatives like Mission VetCheck or V.A. Claims I am
22 confident that we will serve as a national model for
23 years to come. A common phrase in the military is we
24 adapt to overcome. As we move forward through the
25

1
2 end of 2020 and into the new year we will strive to
3 improve with each day to better serve our
4 constituents and the issues they face. We thank you
5 for the opportunity to testify on this matter and
6 look forward to any questions that you or other
7 members of the committee may have. Thank you.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Is anyone else
10 testifying?

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Do we have a second
12 person testifying, or are the other two individuals
13 here for Q&A?

14 UNIDENTIFIED: We're here for Q&A.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: OK.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you very
17 much. Thank you, Commissioner. Thank you. Um, OK,
18 so I just want to begin by asking questions and then
19 I'll, I'll go to my colleagues. Um, so first let's
20 talk about the housing. Um, how did the DVS work to
21 locate housing during the pandemic in a safe manner?
22 What I understand is like during the pandemic and
23 especially during March and April, ah, people
24 couldn't actually go out to see housing, um, and
25 because they needed to shelter in place, um, may have

1
2 been quarantined, could have been in isolation. So
3 you mentioned I think there were, how many people did
4 you find housing during the pandemic? Oh, you're,
5 you're muted.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: You got it. OK,
7 sorry, Mr. Chair, continue, I'm sorry. I just
8 wanted, I'm muted, yeah.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Oh, did you hear my
10 question?

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, I did. Um, I
12 just want to make sure I've got this right. It was,
13 ah, how many folks did we help as far as finding
14 housing during the pandemic, is that correct?

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, right.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So I just want to,
17 um, start by just clearing up the, ah, just to make
18 the fiscal year, the fiscal year comparison for now.
19 Um, and then to dig down deep. Just, as mentioned in
20 the testimony, Mr. Chair, so for FY 2020 we've housed
21 184, ah, veterans, and then during fiscal year 2019
22 it was 158, just to provide that, that, you know,
23 difference as far as we did increase it, ah, fiscal
24 year to fiscal year. And then as far as the, ah,
25 during the pandemic, ah, I will, give me a second,

1 let me see if I can get this, let me just add these
2 up. I'm counting, if we look at from February to,
3 um, August as far as the height of it, I'm just
4 adding this right now, forgive me. All right, so I'm
5 counting it out from, excuse me, not February, yep,
6 let's go February to August, give me a sec. I'm just
7 adding these up right now in real time. Um, 65 is
8 the number from February to August, Mr. Chair.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So how was, how was
11 that done during the pandemic? Like I mentioned, you
12 know, many people couldn't find housing, um, since
13 the beginning of the pandemic. Many had to shelter
14 in place. Some were in isolation, some were in
15 quarantine. So it was a very challenging time to
16 find housing. So how was DVS able to do that in a
17 safe manner?

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, for us it
19 was, um, just to name a few of different things that
20 we did, you know, we had, you know, regular calls
21 with, ah, Human Resource Administration, their, their
22 public engagement unit and other partners to make
23 sure that we can keep getting listings. Um, we also
24 had held virtual viewings and, you know, we sent
25 videos and photos, ah, of the units, ah, you know,

1
2 to, to our clients and make sure they were able to
3 view. So as far as that active, almost acting as
4 something of a broker for the veterans who were
5 living in housing, we just found ways to continue to
6 push forward on that, ah, Mr. Chair.

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible] What
8 kind of housing, like it, um, was it supportive
9 housing? Was it, um, regular housing where a
10 veteran, you know, you're able to find housing in, in
11 some buildings, so in the five boroughs. So how, how
12 was it done? My question is how was it done then,
13 you know, when the veteran, um, looks at an
14 apartment, ah, virtually and then has to go down and
15 move in, was there any type of testing? Um, was
16 there any type of, um, waiting to find, to see if
17 anyone in the building was in quarantine or in
18 isolation? So this way the veteran was able to
19 transition into that apartment in a safe manner.
20 Like how, how was, how did the process work? If
21 you'd just give me like, you have 65, you found 65
22 apartments for veterans, so if you'd just give me
23 like, like an example, an example [inaudible] was
24 done with HRA to get that veteran into housing in a
25 safe manner?

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So there's, there's
3 what we mentioned as far as the, the remote aspect of
4 it, with the outreach and a lot of things
5 transitioning to as opposed to in-person being done,
6 ah, via telephone, ah, via Zoom, and as far as this
7 other question of, you know, testing the locations to
8 make sure that they were appropriate, ah, for those
9 veterans I can't speak to those private owners of
10 those properties as far as what their standard was.
11 Ah, I can say that, you know, as far as brokering
12 that lengthy exchange, a lot of which was virtual,
13 was getting to these conclusions of being able to
14 continue to house the veterans. And also as far as
15 the types of housing, we were talking mostly about
16 those who were within the city's shelter system, so
17 those for whom we were looking at transitional,
18 looking at supportive housing as far as the types
19 that were on the table.

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Do you have a
21 breakdown of how many went into supportive housing,
22 how many went into, ah, apartments, not supportive
23 housing? Do you have a breakdown of that?

24

25

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't have that
3 right now, Mr. Chair. We'd be happy to circle back
4 with it, though.

5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So you feel
6 confident that whatever housing you found for
7 veterans it was done in a safe manner?

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Absolutely.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I mean everything,
10 OK.

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

12 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Um, now, ah, a
13 report shows that 400,000 people, um, left New York,
14 I don't know if you read that report, um, it was a
15 few months ago and, um, which means there's a lot of
16 vacancies in buildings throughout the city. So how
17 is DVS taking advantage of those vacancies by filling
18 them with veterans?

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think for us
20 it's, a different way to put this is, um, think of
21 our VPC team as, ah, well, first and foremost we are
22 continuing our outreach to landlords and so we've
23 been able to see through that outreach the, you know,
24 increased response, I guess receptiveness to housing
25 the veterans, and so as far as capacity goes, you

1 know, we make sure that landlords are able to, you
2 know, sign up to, to list any of their vacancies or
3 let us know if they want vets and we have someone,
4 ah, in our, you know, our housing support service
5 team who simply works to continue to have those touch
6 points so we know who is, ah, you know, what we are
7 offering and to say, hey, look, if you want having
8 vets please, you know, let us, reach out to us and we
9 can connect you with the veterans. That's one aspect
10 of this. I think another aspect of it is that our,
11 ah, you know, our veteran peer counselors, ah, who
12 are excellent, are just continuing to, you know, one
13 by one work with our veterans to go through these
14 back and forths that result in a veteran successfully
15 moving into a place from the shelter. So it's, you
16 know, it's, it's, we've the ground game of working
17 with our veterans as far as helping them through that
18 process and applying for housing. And we have the
19 more strategic game where we have someone on staff
20 who is constantly reaching out to owners of
21 properties to say, hey, look, you know, take our
22 people in.

24 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How many veterans
25 are currently in the homeless shelter?

1 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I can get back to
2
3 you on the exact number.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Approximately.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Oh, approximately?
6 We're just under 600, approximately, and that's,
7 that's approximately right now, it's just under 600
8 right now, Mr. Chair.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How many of the 600
10 are eligible, um, for HUD-VASH, eligible to go into,
11 um, into regular housing if they're able to,
12 [inaudible] supportive housing?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to have
14 to get back to you with the exact number on that as
15 far as how many break out for VASH and how many break
16 out for VASH Continuum. I'm sorry, I don't have that
17 exact number on me right now. We'll...

18 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I just want to ask,
19 yeah, I just want ask, Commissioner, [inaudible] team
20 if, ah, if possibly if they could do, you know, a
21 little more outreach, um, in regards to finding
22 vacancies, 'cause the numbers of 400,000 people who
23 left New York City and the numbers of, ah, homeless
24 veterans at 600, so if you take the 600 and 400,000
25 people that left New York City I think that we could

1 put a nice, ah, majority of the homeless veterans
2 into, into regular housing.

3
4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Ah...

5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So if, if we could,
6 maybe if we could do just a better job just to do to,
7 to do outreach and more social media, ah, reaching
8 out to people that have vacancies.

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Ah, no, I, I
10 completely agree. We can continue to do that. I
11 just want to be clear, too. Our numbers are going
12 down. In other words, we're still continuing to move
13 the needle in the right direction.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, I, I agree
15 with that.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: But, but more can
17 be, I, I won't, um, we're not gonna sit down on our
18 laurels. We'll continue to chop the tree, and I
19 completely take the feedback as far as the outreach,
20 and, ah, we will definitely take that, yeah.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Um, so I want to
22 speak about the, the food, ah, security. What are
23 the current number, number, ah, what are the current
24 number, ah, what is the number of, ah, New York City
25 veterans right now.

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Right now the count
3 of, as far as our New York City veteran community, in
4 total we're looking at 210,000, ah, Mr. Chair.

5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And how many of,
6 ah, of those veterans does DVS have contact
7 information for [inaudible].

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And I just want to
9 be clear, that's 210,000 is, of course, the
10 approximate number, 210,000. [inaudible] gives an
11 approximate number as far as those we have contact
12 for. I'm saying this is an approximate look. It's
13 still working with our partners and finishing up
14 agreements with some of our fellow city agencies to
15 make sure we can obtain information they have
16 veterans. So I'd say it's, ah, approximately 70,000
17 for whom we have information for. But, once again,
18 ink is still drying on a lot of those agreements, and
19 I'm happy to defer to Cass, who's also on this,
20 Associate Commissioner Cass Alvarez, if she wants to
21 add more to that [inaudible].

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So 70,000 people
23 during the pandemic from beginning of March up until,
24 ah, up until today. You're saying that 70,000 people
25 were reached out to in regards to resources for, um,

1
2 ah, needed resources during COVID, ah, during this
3 pandemic?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, no, good
5 question, very good question. What I'm saying is we
6 have, so there's, right now we have approximately
7 70,000 as far as the contact information of veterans
8 who live in the city. And, you know, that's the, the
9 whole of what we've got. But then as far as our
10 outreach when we talk about, you know, the number of
11 folks who, you know, are agreeing to subscribe to our
12 newsletter, or the folks who we're still calling,
13 we're at 17,000 is how many we've called so far with
14 Mission VetCheck. So we're still chopping the tree
15 down there as well. And so, you know, we, we try to
16 reach out to the 210,000 through all means possible,
17 ah, including that 70 in whatever way. But me
18 reaching out versus you affirming that you've heard
19 from me, they're two different things, sir.

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So the 70,000, so
21 you don't have the contact information for the
22 70,000? You said you only, you reached out to
23 17,000.

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: What I said is we,
25 so for us right now we have contact information for

1 the 70,000. So far we've been able to reach out to
2 17,000 of the 70,000.

3
4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Is that because of
5 manpower? Like how do you reach out to the 17,000,
6 17,000 out of, out of 70,000?

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's not a manpower
8 issue, it's, it's, ah, this is the different things
9 all happening at once. One of them is us having
10 different agreements with our various city agencies,
11 as we're gathering this information for the veterans.
12 So to make sure that we've got as much as we can
13 through what the city currently has collected through
14 a lot of our sister organizations. Ah, another piece
15 of it is, you know, just the, making these phone
16 calls, as far as one by one, ah, as part of our
17 Mission VetCheck program to, to make sure we're
18 touching with these folks and it, it's, it's
19 something where we can't just, you know, snap our
20 fingers and have called all 70,000 overnight. Um, so
21 it does take time.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How many of the
23 70,000 does DVS have emails for?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I have to get back
25 to you with the exact number as far the 70,000 that

1 we have emails for. So we've got the contacts. To
2 be clear, we have 70,000 contacts.

3
4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: If you have, if you
5 have, if you have, you mentioned, Commissioner, that
6 you can't, ah, contact them with the snap of a
7 finger. But if you have, let's say, 70,000 emails
8 and they have computers and they have email addresses
9 then with one click of a button you could reach the
10 70,000 people. So that's why I'm curious to know how
11 many, ah, do you have phone numbers, contact phone
12 numbers for and how many do you have emails for, and
13 that's why I'm wondering why the number is 17,000.

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So we've got, so
15 it's about, we can get, get back on it as far as the
16 specifics. I know right now we have of the 70,000 we
17 have 24,000 emails. And I'll just give an example,
18 back to the testimony where I mentioned how we've
19 had, ah, more folks opening the DVS newsletter, yet
20 we have about, you know, it's 11.4% is our opening
21 rate, you know, so sending that email out is just
22 step one, you know, as far as what we can reach. But
23 we are happy to circle back with more granular
24 information. Um, you know, the most important take-
25 away to me is that we're doing everything we can with

2 all that we have, Mr. Chair, to reach out to our
3 constituents, so through whatever means are available
4 to us.

5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Does DVS have
6 access to, to those emails, 24,000 emails? I mean,
7 it's in house. You have 24,000 email addresses? Is
8 that a fact?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That, that is
10 correct. And so there's...

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So in other
12 words...

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: There's a
14 difference between have those email addresses and
15 folks opening it up when you email them. I just want
16 to be very clear, so, yes.

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So you send out
18 24,000 emails and then it all depends how many people
19 actually open it up, right?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So that's where
22 you're saying, so that's where you got the 17,000?

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: 17,000 is with the
24 phone number program, with Mission VetCheck, as far
25 as the number of the calls that have gone out so far.

1 So for us it's we have such a diverse community, Mr.
2 Chair, that it's really about what's the best way to
3 reach someone. So you got email, we've got this
4 regular drum beat of the newsletter going out.
5 You've got the phone calls through Mission VetCheck
6 where each week we're placing more calls directly to
7 those for whom we have phone numbers. You have
8 social media, where we're active, ah, you know,
9 online, ah, particularly, ah, Facebook, Twitter,
10 [inaudible]. Ah, you have folks call as well. We
11 still, you know, have the phone calls coming in. And
12 so it's just really by all means available to us to
13 try to throw everything but the kitchen sink at the
14 outreach subject.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So the 17, let me
17 go back to the email. Is that all in house? Like
18 when you, when you tell, when you say that you
19 reached out to 24,000 to people or you actually
20 contacted 17,000 veterans, is that done in house or
21 this is information you may be getting from, you
22 know, not-for-profits or other agencies who have
23 contacted with the, with the, with, ah, with the
24 veterans. So basically what I want to know is, is
25 that does DVS have a database of all the veterans who

1
2 have, you're telling me you contacted, or do you rely
3 on, um, not-for-profits and others who are supplying
4 you information. OK, I contacted 5000 people. I
5 contacted 2000. I contacted, you know, is this all
6 coming directly from DVS is what I want to know? Is
7 everything done in house, like all the information in
8 the database is within DVS?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So for us it's, um,
10 we, right now we are working with partner
11 organizations on this. So we do have a good amount
12 of information that is in house. But we also have
13 info that we're relying on our partners are and right
14 now we're building that database, um, using multiple
15 sources as far as having one engine for this. But to
16 be clear there's the vehicles with DVS. Then there
17 is also amplifying things through our partners and
18 that's what we do with other measures such as social
19 media, such as folks visiting the website and what-
20 not, but we are building the database, Mr. Chair.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Are, are they not
22 allowed, are they not allowed to give DVS the
23 information, like personal information, like an email
24 address?

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's not, it's the,
3 for a lot of it, and I'll say a little bit more and
4 I'm going to, you know, bring in Cass, Associate
5 Commissioner Alvarez, on this one. Um, a lot of it
6 is agreement by agreement with organization by
7 organization, or discussion by discussion. A perfect
8 example is the ROAN list, the Return on Active Names
9 List. That's names that we receive from the V.A.,
10 saying here are people we're tracking who have, ah,
11 left the service but who now believe we reside in New
12 York City. That was through a discussion with that
13 group. When we look at other organizations that we
14 tie in with IDNYC, that was a discussion followed by
15 an agreement to, to iron out with the IDNYC folks to
16 know which veterans, we've gotten the veterans'
17 identification on their card, um, you know, may we
18 have their info. And so I, I can defer to Cass also
19 to really speak a little more about this.

20 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Yeah,
21 absolutely, Commissioner. Thank you for that. Um,
22 and good afternoon, Mr. Chair. Thank you for giving
23 us the opportunity to testify today, um, and to
24 address your questions regarding the agency's COVID
25 response. Um, so the Commissioner is exactly right.

1
2 We've partnered with agencies, um, as we developed
3 our Mission VetCheck, ah, outreach initiative to
4 acquire their veteran lists, whether that be through
5 constituents that they've served, um, veterans using
6 the IDNYC card, um, and we got those lists through
7 different agreements with those sister agencies. Um,
8 and so that is what helped us build that constituent
9 base that we reached out to through Mission VetCheck.
10 Um, as Commissioner mentioned, we have roughly around
11 24,000 email addresses. Right now that information
12 is housed in different places. We're working towards
13 pushing all of that into our CRM and streamlining
14 them into one system.

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So I, that's,
16 that's, that's what I'm trying to figure out. Like
17 why does it take so long to get to 24,000 emails in,
18 in DVS's system?

19 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: So,
20 um...

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Why, why do you
22 have to rely on, ah, other agencies or other, you
23 know, other sources to give you the information or
24 to, or to do an outreach when DVS can just, you know,
25

1
2 one click of a button you can get all this
3 information out like within minutes.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to be very
5 clear about this.

6 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: That's what I'm
7 trying to figure out here.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's, it's, if you,
9 just because you email 24,000 people doesn't mean...

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible]

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: ...that all
12 [inaudible] are going to pick up, and so it's a
13 question of, OK, what else do we, what other means do
14 we have to reaching out to these folks. So...

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, so, it's the
16 effort.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [inaudible] in
18 other words what you're saying that already happens.
19 It's just we, you know, we've got to make sure that
20 if, if someone is, so 70% of veterans are 55 or older
21 in the city, if someone is not as quick or savvy on
22 email how else can we be able to engage them, so I
23 just want...

24 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I agree. I agree,
25 that you, you're not gonna get just, you know, if

1
2 you're sending out 24,000 emails you're not going to
3 have 24,000, 24,000 people opening up. I just want
4 to make sure that the effort is being done that you
5 have the entire database in house within DVS, DVS,
6 and that information should have, you should already
7 have that. Ah, it shouldn't take too long to just...

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So then it's we've
9 got the 24,000. It's, as far as the, when I talk
10 about the larger number of 70,000, that's based on
11 these agreements that we've hammered out one by one
12 with our sister entities, and a lot of it goes back
13 to, and I'll defer back to Cass 'cause she's got the
14 ball on this, is this issue of consent. In other
15 words, it's, you know, to make sure that, you know,
16 if someone has data for, ah, one of their
17 constituents, that they are comfortable knowing that
18 it is being used if they share it with us as a sister
19 agency in a way where, ah, you know, privacy issues
20 are not being violated, where everything is above
21 board and where we're not, you know, it does not
22 appear, appear intrusive. So that's a whole other
23 aspect of this, too, and why it takes time, brick by
24 brick, to build, what we build to get the data from
25 our sister agencies as we grow our database.

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS 45
2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: All right, OK.
3 Thank you. Um, I just want, I want to get on to
4 continuing the, on the food security.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm sorry, Mr.
6 Chair, I gotta, I gotta throw this in there, too,
7 something that's completely, that is important, too,
8 is, you know, we have some members of our community
9 who won't even say that I am veteran, you know, who
10 won't even identify that they are a part, a, a
11 veteran, and so that makes it even more nuanced here
12 as far as what we're doing in aggregating this info.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible] I got
14 that, OK. Um, also regarding the food security you
15 mentioned that, um, um, you referred veterans to 311
16 for the, for the grab-and-go meals?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So we, we have 10
18 people in staff who are trained in the GetFoodNYC
19 program who can enroll them directly. But you also,
20 you know, have veterans who may call 311 as a
21 resource for it. But as far as GetFoodNYC that's
22 something where we've got people on staff who are
23 able to enroll veterans, and that's the one we have
24 350 to 400, ah, veterans who are homebound, who have
25 meals delivered to them right now, through that

1 program. And then that's separate from the other
2 work that we do to push food out once a week from
3 Brooklyn and once a week from the Bronx.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: But if the veterans
5 call 311 on his or her phone would you have that
6 information if they called in saying I'm a veteran?
7 Would that information go to you?

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes, um, it would.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So the folks from
11 311 will send us a report regularly about this, as
12 far as folks who call in on issues where that
13 identifies veterans, and we also include, just so you
14 know, it's, um, in Local Law 44, um, submission, as
15 far as our reporting, of, ah, call center, etcetera,
16 there's a section that does focus on 311 where we do
17 include that information. And so in our Local Law 44
18 submission we also have that ironed out as far as
19 what's coming into the 311 call center and, um, I'm
20 sorry, Cass, I don't know if you want to add anything
21 to that.

22 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Ah, no
23 Commissioner, I think you, I think you've got that.
24 If the veteran requires, um, service from our agency
25

1 then we would follow up with them and we would get
2 their contact information so that we can, ah, render,
3 render that service to them.

4
5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: What, what would
6 you say is different, um, between, um, a non-veteran
7 calling 311 for food for, for their GetFoodNYC or a
8 veteran calling up? What is, what is the difference
9 in services? Like when you're calling 311?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm sorry, I want
11 to make sure I've got that question. Was it the
12 difference in services if you call 311 for food, Mr.
13 Chair, is that the question?

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, let's say,
15 let's say a veteran calls, um, um, 311, ah, for the
16 GetFoodNYC program, and a non-veteran calls up. What
17 is the difference in services that 311 would take
18 that information as a veteran and give that
19 information over to you?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to just
21 clarify one thing, too, just while we're, just to get
22 it right. So right now we haven't gotten any, ah,
23 311 referrals specific to food. That's, that's one
24 piece. And the other one, this goes back to
25 something I mentioned earlier where, you know, 311

1 knowing whether that person is a veteran or not, if
2 they come, say, hey, I need food, and they don't
3 identify as a veteran, ah, then they just possibly,
4 we're supported by the city yet we not know that they
5 are a, a veteran.

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: If someone does
8 call in saying they're a veteran what happens then?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Then we'll know,
10 well, whatever their need is, ah, depending on the
11 need, first all 311 will track that and once they
12 know they're a veteran, they already have certain
13 information that they track and so they'll, they'll
14 know that. Um, but if they say, if they're calling
15 for something that is tied to a larger citywide
16 program, if they call about something, like say
17 benefits for veterans, then that's something where,
18 of course, that service request ultimately
19 [inaudible] to triage. If they're calling about
20 something like, ah, let's say it's a, it's a spouse
21 and they're calling about GetCoveredNYC, about the
22 city's, you know, the, the medical, the getting on
23 Obamacare here through the city, um, we might not, we
24 wouldn't know about that, that person would be
25 referred to the folks who handle GetCoveredNYC. And

1
2 so it's really, when it's something veteran-specific
3 then we'll see the service request. And anything,
4 once they know that they're a veteran they track what
5 those needs are and that breakout is, it's in the
6 same information we provide in the Local Law 44, ah,
7 submission, which comes in December, every December.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So if someone calls
9 311, if a veteran calls 311, just calling up to get
10 food and that person says I'm veteran, all I want to
11 do is get food, so that information would not go to
12 you saying that someone, a veteran just called? Is
13 that correct?

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I can't, yeah, I
15 can't, I can't say we've got 100% visibility in that
16 case. That's correct. I can't say that we'll have
17 100%, ah, visibility on it.

18 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Do you receive any
19 phone calls from 311 saying that a veteran just
20 called up for food?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: No.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: No, OK. So, so in
23 other words it's not being tracked by, by a veteran,
24 right?

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: By the veteran, by
3 the veteran identifier.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: By the status.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah.

6 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: OK, so that, yeah,
7 that was my question. Um, now if, if a veteran
8 called up asking for food and you referred him to 311
9 or maybe you made the phone call to them to 311, ah,
10 I know that in the beginning of, um, of the
11 GetFoodNYC program there were many obstacles and
12 challenges to people, um, maybe because of the
13 dietary restrictions or some, something. Did you
14 receive like a second call from veterans saying we're
15 having an issue with the food that we're receiving,
16 that you know of?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's, I, I guess,
18 yeah, I, we hadn't gotten anything through the 311
19 channel, especially because as soon as GetFoodNYC
20 came on board we made it a point to have our people
21 trained to be able to deal with these things
22 themselves. And so, in, in a issue where, ah,
23 someone is reaching out to 311 and saying that they
24 are, if they, what I'm hearing you say is someone
25 calls 311, they say I'm a veteran, and I'm

1 complaining about GetFoodNYC. Will that get back to
2 DVS? And I can't say that that will. I know that if
3 we put them in GetFoodNYC and they come back to us
4 and say I have some issues, then we take that right
5 away and, and go back to the 311 team on it. Um, so,
6 yeah. And to be clear, 311-related issues, anything
7 on food through 311, we do not receive. Our, our
8 food workers come through us enrolling people
9 directly in GetFoodNYC. Through the food that we
10 distribute every week through what's coming of
11 Brooklyn, ah, with folks from the Campaign Against
12 Hunger and through what's coming out of the Bronx.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: You haven't
15 received any complaints after, after notifying 311?

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We, yeah, we
17 haven't received any complaints on food through 311.
18 To be very clear, sir, no complaints on food through
19 311, no requests for food through 311, and, ah, you
20 know, for anyone who calls 311 asking about a food
21 connection is typically tied directly to GetFoodNYC.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: But how many people
23 actually reached out to, um, going through DVS or Vet
24 Connect, asking for food?

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So that's the, um,
3 that's the number that gets us to the, it's 350 to
4 400 right now that are still receiving meals that are
5 homebound veterans. I believe the overall count is
6 462, where we've gotten any certain requests. But,
7 ah, so 462 total requests, but we're at a current
8 rate of 350 to 400 who say, OK, I still received this
9 food from GetFoodNYC.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And all are
11 satisfied?

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm sorry, say it
13 again, Mr. Chair?

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Are they all
15 satisfied with the services?

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, I believe so, as
17 far as just the numbers are telling me that they're
18 satisfied, ah, with the services and what we, we like
19 is that we also are working to get the fresh food
20 out, as far as what's coming out of Brooklyn and
21 what's coming out of the Bronx as well to folks, and
22 so, you know, we're doing everything we can to try to
23 get food in front of our people, um, when they say
24 they need it.

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS 53
2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I'll ask a few more
3 questions before I give it over to my colleagues.
4 Um, ah, I just want to speak about employment, um,
5 for, for a few minutes. How many veterans, um, have
6 lost their jobs because of the pandemic, and how many
7 veterans were furloughed, um, during this pandemic,
8 and how did DVS help them navigate to receive any
9 type of employment or?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, I can't answer,
11 and I'll, I'll start a little bit and I'll get it
12 over to Cass. I can't speak on the veterans who've
13 lost jobs or furloughed, we don't have that data. I
14 know that nationwide the veteran employment rate is
15 6.4%. But I can't speak in a hyperlocal way on New
16 York City as far as how New York City veterans have
17 been impacted at this time on this. Um, what we can
18 say as far as things that we've done on employment,
19 ah, as we mentioned, not just Empire Vets platform,
20 but also things that we see with SBS and Work Force
21 One and promoting that to our veterans, promoting the
22 DFTA's, ah, Department for the Aging's, ah, senior
23 employment program, promoting NYC at Work, which is
24 with our Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities,
25 and so we've really done everything we can to try to

1
2 get the word out to employment opportunities for our
3 veterans, even in these times. Um, yeah.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: But knowing,
5 knowing we staff the Vet Connect on, regarding being
6 unemployment, losing their jobs, anything? I mean?

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Oh, I'm sorry, I
8 thought you were asking me a question. I thought you
9 were just asking what is the New York City
10 unemployment level for veterans, and we try to define
11 this, by the way. It's not something that's gathered
12 in the public use microdata and what the census, the
13 Bureau of Labor Statistics collect or what the census
14 collects. Like we tried a few weeks ago, no, a few
15 months ago, so we could know with a T what the
16 veteran employment, ah, level was in New York City.
17 We couldn't get it. But, um, that's separate from
18 the Vet Connect question that you just asked me.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, so what's the
20 answer to the Vet Connect question? How many, how
21 many veterans are reached out through Vet Connect or
22 to, um, to DVS that they were either furloughed or
23 lost their job, ah, during this pandemic?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going, I'm
25 going to refer to Cass for that. I just want to

1
2 start off by just making clear that when we look at
3 this it's not just Vet Connect is the intake, it's
4 we're thinking of it in terms of folks who come to us
5 in general between what we've see in Mission
6 VetCheck, what we see through email, through phone,
7 all of it. But I'll, I'll defer to Cass to add more.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you.

9 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Thank
10 you for that, um, Commissioner. So, ah, we know from
11 March through August, um, that Vet Connect received
12 125 service requests regarding employment.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So what happens
14 with these requests?

15 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Ah, they
16 get referred to providers that are within the, um,
17 service provider network. Um, and that includes some
18 of the organizations that the Commissioner just
19 mentioned, ah, in addition to, ah, Work Force, the
20 Institute for Career Development, etcetera. Um,
21 daycare coordinators at VetCheck, I'm sorry, at
22 VetConnectNYC assess that person's, ah, need and then
23 make that referral, ah, based on the appropriateness
24 of that provider.

1 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: My next question is
2
3 how many of that, how many of the 125 were veterans
4 who didn't have employment before the pandemic? Ah,
5 how many were veterans who were furloughed, and how
6 many were veterans who just lost their job because of
7 the pandemic?

8 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: So we
9 don't have that breakdown prepared for today, um,
10 Chair, but we can back to you and, and take a look
11 and see if there, if we can find that information.
12 That is granular, um, details that we would have to
13 look into.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Now I'm gonna ask
15 the big question, you ready for this one? So the big
16 question is, is that since the beginning of the
17 pandemic, since March, um, my office has helped, ah,
18 probably well over 6000 people in all five boroughs
19 and beyond, um, for people who couldn't navigate and
20 get, um, unemployment, and it was almost impossible
21 to get a hold of the Department of Labor or any, any
22 person that filed for unemployment. You could sit on
23 the phone, ah, for weeks before even getting someone
24 on the phone, and I was working with the governor's
25 office on that. And I know many of my colleagues

1
2 also were working on, um, getting people on
3 unemployment because people couldn't get a hold of
4 them. So from these 125 people and plus the 17,000
5 you may have email addresses for that you got in
6 contact with, or the 24,000 that you have access to,
7 or maybe even the 70,000, um, that there is some type
8 of contact information for, how many of those people
9 were actually, um, checked on to see if they were
10 able to get the pandemic insurance, ah, or just to
11 get a hold of unemployment, um, and have that income?

12 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: So, Mr.
13 Chair, I want, I want to be clear that, um, the
14 17,000 phone calls that we're referring to are 17,000
15 calls that were placed to the veteran community, ah,
16 through Mission VetCheck, which is our, ah, proactive
17 outreach campaign to place supportive phone calls to
18 veterans throughout NYC. Um, the calls that were
19 placed were done so by volunteers, um, and through a
20 partnership with the National Guard. Um, each of
21 those callers has a resource guide, um, that provides
22 information about unemployment services, financial
23 assistance, etcetera. Um, we cannot itemize how many
24 folks asked particularly for, um, ah, at the moment
25 right now, ah, we don't have, ah, the information

1 before us to itemize those requests. Um, however, we
2 can tell you that, that we know that that
3 information, if based on that person's need was
4 provided using that resource guide. Um, so if a
5 person didn't proactively flag that they had a need
6 for XYZ, um, then that conversation happened
7 organically and that volunteer is equipped to meet
8 that person's needs as best they can using that
9 reference. If that veteran has a more complex need,
10 then they get referred to DVS, um, and then our folks
11 will respond to them.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Also, I just want
14 to add, Mr. Chair, with so nuanced with this one is,
15 you know, unemployment is a state program run by the
16 state's Department of Labor, and so what we have
17 done is try to spread the word about some of the
18 programs that Department of Labor has for veterans,
19 um, you know, specifically as far as, you know,
20 things with local veterans' employment
21 representatives and anything else that, ah, that they
22 offer, for those who seek counseling once they file
23 for unemployment, ah, benefits. But, once again,
24 it's so tricky because this is a state program and
25 we're a city agency. But we are aware of this issue

1
2 and we do try to make sure that our veterans know the
3 resources that the Department of Labor has
4 specifically for vets.

5 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: There, honestly,
6 there's no boundaries when it comes to city, state,
7 or, or federal. I mean...

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, I respect that,
9 I appreciate it. You're right.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, yeah.

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: You're absolutely
12 right.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, so, yeah, I'm
14 just curious to know up until today, like how many
15 people were actually helped with unemployment to
16 navigate through that? Is there any way to, ah, do
17 you, do you have the numbers that you got from not-
18 for-profits or other agencies, how many veterans
19 needed to navigate to receive the pandemic insurance
20 or unemployment?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We, we don't have
22 those numbers right now, Mr. Chair. We'd be happy to
23 try to, to see what we can obtain. It's not
24 something that we have, and with this being a state
25 program it's not something that we have been tracking

2 in that active a way. But we don't have that
3 information right now.

4 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Um, and
5 I can add to that, Commissioner, that, um,
6 unemployment was not within the first top five
7 categories of assistance requests that were made
8 through Mission VetCheck.

9 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: What were the top
10 five?

11 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: I'll
12 grab that for you. Ah, so food insecurity, ah, V.A.
13 claims/assistance, ah, the third was health care, and
14 financial assistance, and then questions around
15 unstable housing.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And this came
17 through where?

18 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: This
19 came through Mission VetCheck, sir.

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Is that, is that
21 the only, ah, source you get the information from?

22 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: It's one
23 of the outlets that we, we, ah, get information from.
24 Of course, we are fielding, ah, direct requests for
25 service through our number, so folks are reaching out

1 to the agency directly. Um, in addition to that, um,
2 we are informing people proactively through our
3 newsletter, which has become much more robust since
4 the onset of the pandemic. Ah, our newsletter has
5 gone from a monthly cadence to a weekly cadence, um,
6 and it is rich with resources and information. Ah,
7 we've covered unemployment, we've covered financial
8 assistance, we've covered housing, SSBF, ah, so we've
9 been really proactive about getting information about
10 these resources out there digitally and through the
11 phone calls that we've been making through Mission
12 VetCheck, in case we're not connected to somebody
13 digitally.
14

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: All right. I'm
16 just, I'm just kind of concerned about the, you know,
17 people who don't have income and now we're seeing
18 like, ah, sort of a second wave, um, so, and what's
19 happening is is that in March and April we were at,
20 at the peak, and then June, July, August and
21 thereafter like people who didn't work March and
22 April and may have gone back to work, ah, thereafter,
23 but now they may have seen themselves back in the
24 position where they were in March and April. So my
25 question is is that, I mean, can you do more

1
2 outreach, ah, through um, VetCheck and, and other
3 providers and to actually ask the veterans to see if
4 they need information, if they need help to get a
5 hold of the Department of Labor, if they're having
6 any obstacles? Because I understand it's not a, it's
7 not a city, it's not a city program, but we, as a
8 city we should help the people, whether it's, it's
9 city or not, to make sure that and, you know, that
10 they have those resources and we're able to navigate
11 for them to make sure that they, they have that
12 income whatever, whatever income they could receive
13 if they don't have a job right now. And we, we know
14 the pandemic insurance was \$600, um, beginning in
15 March and April, and that's a lot of money for a
16 veteran.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, I think
18 we can, we're happy to, to explore what we can do to
19 kind of, because I'm completely with you about...

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I, I just can't
21 imagine how that could not be one of the top five.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, I, I just
23 want to put this out there. What's tricky is,
24 remember, it's really 71, a little over 71% of our
25 population is 55 or older in the city, and I don't

1 know if that's something that is kind of baked into
2 this where we have a large retiree population, you
3 know, and if that's a reason why this isn't emerging
4 as one of the higher needs. You know, it's a
5 different set of needs for this, this older group.
6 And, ah, that doesn't change the fact that we do need
7 to work on this and we'll definitely look at it. I
8 agree with you.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible].

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I very much agree,
12 but I just want to say so much of our population skew
13 is older. Um, I think that's what's affecting the
14 numbers here.

15 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Got it. OK, that's
16 a, that's a good point, and, OK, so you could just,
17 um, work on that [inaudible]. So I see, I'm looking
18 at Alicka Ampry-Samuel, she's not smiling yet, but I
19 think she has a question. Oh, there we go. Does
20 that mean you have a question, Alicka?

21 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Yes.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: All right, all
23 right, so let's go in order. Um, first of all, I'd
24 like to acknowledge, I think we have Council Member
25 Paul Vallone who joined us.

1 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Just a brief
2 intermission, ah, from the committee counsel, um, for
3 some ground rules. I will now call on council
4 members in the order they have used the Zoom raise
5 hand function. Ah, council members please keep your
6 questions to five minutes. The Sergeant at Arms will
7 keep a timer and I will let you know when your time
8 is up. Ampry-Samuel, you have the floor.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Thank you
11 so much, Chair Deutsch [inaudible] ...

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Thank you
14 so much, Chair Deutsch. Um, you did an excellent
15 job, very thorough. Every time, so I had a list of
16 questions here and every time you asked and went into
17 like so much detail I was like, oh, check that off,
18 oh, check that one off. [laughs] So thank you so
19 much, um, for your dedication. Um, it's great to see
20 you again, Commissioner, as always. It's, it's
21 really good to see you. And I just wanted to I guess
22 clarify a couple of things, um, before I get into two
23 questions that was not asked already. Um, in
24 reference to, 'cause you kept mentioning the older
25 population and 70% over 50 or 55, um, and I get

1
2 VetCheck calls, and I understand, um, just the entire
3 conversation around the how many people you reached
4 to. But I remember having a conversation with you,
5 um, maybe about a month ago, just a check-in, and my
6 concerns were really around how many of those calls
7 actually landed, how many people did you actually
8 speak to, like a live person? Um, and that was
9 important to me because during the pandemic when you
10 look at other agencies that were doing wellness
11 checks it wasn't about the thousands of calls that
12 were made, it was for me about how many people did
13 you actually reach out to and you had a connection on
14 the other end when it was a live person that said,
15 you know, thank you for calling, this is what's going
16 with me, and this is what I need. And so, um, I just
17 wanted to get a sense of how many calls actually
18 landed where there was a live person and you did
19 follow-up on that universe of veterans?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for the
21 question. I'm gonna defer to, um, you know,
22 Associate Commissioner Alvarez on that. She can give
23 you the exact numbers. We have that. But I just
24 want to preface it with you've got the calls that
25 were made. You've got what's answered. And then

1
2 you've got the number that come back to us as service
3 requests. We don't know the number where, you know,
4 I was able to as a caller deal with someone's need
5 right there and it not get to DVS, 'cause that the
6 one thing, but she'll give you the numbers right now,
7 but it's really, it's the calls that were made, it's,
8 OK, you've got what's answered, but then after the
9 answer point, between answered and then there's
10 service requests is what we see. In other words, a
11 caller had a 14-page script of things they can do and
12 say to help somebody connect the dots right there,
13 and if all else failed they push it over to our
14 agency. And so for us what we don't know, but we
15 really believe was, was effective was just the aspect
16 of this that was just having somebody to talk to. In
17 other words, separate from service requests, just,
18 you know, I'm getting a phone call, I'm in social
19 isolation, and this is another veteran, and we just
20 bonded for a while, and that meant something to me.
21 Or, you know, I'm a spouse [inaudible]. I'll defer
22 to Cass for the rest, but I just want to...

23 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: OK, and,
24 and let me just get my questions out to [inaudible]
25 and Chair, um, [inaudible] if you can just give me

1
2 like a couple more minutes to be able to get all the
3 answers, um, and, and questions. So that was one.
4 Um, and then also with the GetFoodNYC conversation
5 that I was just listening to. Um, you stated that
6 they were satisfied with the services. It was a
7 question about were they satisfied with the services,
8 right? And so, um, for me also that's a, a different
9 issue because, remember, our seniors in certain
10 buildings had issues with not just the nutritional
11 part of the food, but also being able to get the food
12 because there was a conversation around the delivery
13 of services being dropped off at the front of the
14 building or downstairs and having to connect with
15 community folks and volunteers to get that, um, food
16 up to or directly to the front door. And so I know
17 that there was some, um, ah, conversations that you
18 have had, or your organization, the agency, with
19 volunteers to be able to fill in gaps and, and cracks
20 where they were to make sure that the 350 or so that
21 did receive actually received it at the door, and I
22 wanted you to be able to talk a little bit about
23 those partnerships in a meaningful way, because what
24 you were talking about was a lot of numbers, um, and
25 it was, it's really more about the partnerships that

1
2 you made with community-based organizations to be
3 able to really service, um, the veterans and not just
4 what we've been experiencing with the, you know, Uber
5 drivers dropping of the boxes the way they were
6 before. Um, and the last question that I had was
7 just related to the CUNY students. Um, bear with me,
8 um, two more. One is the CUNY students. With CUNY
9 and many of the post-secondary institutions moving to
10 forms of virtual and online learning, has DVS
11 observed any special needs in the student veteran
12 population? So can you speak to that? And the last
13 one, if you can just, you know, highlight any kind of
14 work that you're doing with reentry, um, and
15 veterans, because we do have veterans that have been
16 incarcerated and are returning home, and so it would
17 be helpful to know if you are preparing or doing
18 anything at all related to reentry, as the city is
19 preparing to do some work around it, including an
20 upcoming hearing. So, um, those are my questions.
21 Thank you so much.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Let me, so, I, I
23 appreciate it so much, ah, Councilman. So I'm gonna,
24 Cass is gonna tackle the CUNY one. She's gonna
25 tackle the get, ah, the GetFood, ah, as far as that,

1 that piece, and not to skip through the satisfaction
2 and what-not. I'll speak a little bit to that. I'm
3 sorry, Cass, I'm sorry, she's gonna tackle VetCheck,
4 forgive me. She's gonna tackle VetCheck and she's
5 gonna tackle CUNY. And I'll tackle GetFood, I'll
6 tackle reentry. Um, the first off, with reentry
7 we're, right now we're just starting to get our hands
8 on this issue of what do with the 1500 New York City
9 veterans who are in the state correctional system,
10 and so right now we're still having those discussions
11 on making sure that when, ah, any of those veterans
12 return to New York City, we assume the 1500 or so are
13 from New York City, the majority of them, so we
14 believe, that we could be able to have, receive them
15 with open arms, and that's something that's still in
16 progress right now, as far as just connecting between
17 the Department of Connections we had our, ah,
18 Corrections, and we had our initial discussions in
19 tying it with our DVS aftercare and eviction
20 prevention services that, that team. And so right
21 now that's in it's infancy, but that's something that
22 I believe we will be able to give more information on
23 as we get, you know, ah, you know, when we have a
24 further meeting or next time we check in in general
25

1 just circle back with you on it. That's very near
2 and dear to our hearts. You've got about 1500 who
3 are in the correction system at the state level.
4 You've got approximately 25 in the wing, ah, in,
5 that, in the wing that is reserved for veterans, ah,
6 over in Riker's at the city level who are detainees.
7 And so for us it's making sure we connect those dots.
8 I want to acknowledge you with that, and thank you
9 for bringing up the last time we spoke, too. So just
10 know that that's moving forward. Ah, as far as the
11 GetFoodNYC, with GetFood what we've been doing,
12 because we've got, there, there are 41 people in DVS
13 right now. 38 are actually here 'cause three are
14 deployed, they're currently deployed. Um, of the 38
15 of us 10 people have been trained with how to get
16 folks on the program. So when anyone of our
17 constituents has a problem with it they can
18 communicate with any of those 10 and they can reach
19 out to the GetFoodNYC coordinators. And on top of
20 that, we've been pushing fresh food out, ah, each
21 week from Brooklyn, from, ah, the Campaign Against
22 Hunger site, which is in Canarsie, just south of
23 Brownsville, right, not, not far from the hospital
24 over there. And we've been pushing out the, I said
25

1 2000 bags, one of those bags has enough food to keep
2 someone sustained for as many as three days. And so
3 we've been pushing out, and that's fresh food,
4 that's, you get the protein, you get the starch, you
5 get the vegetables, everything is right there. It's
6 cold and you get directions to heat it up, etcetera.
7 And, and so we've been doing that. And with the,
8 what's going on in the Bronx on Saturdays, that's the
9 USDA's, ah, Farmers to Families food box program.
10 And so you get a box with a gallon of milk with a
11 dozen eggs, with, ah, some frozen chicken, with some
12 yogurt, with some vegetables [inaudible]. So you're
13 getting, this is like stuff that is very good and
14 high-quality fresh food that's going out. And so
15 we've got this mixed bag between our veterans who are
16 using GetFoodNYC. If they have any issues they're
17 letting us know those issues and we're relaying it
18 directly to GetFoodNYC. At the same time, we will go
19 to a VSO in a heartbeat and say, hey, can you please
20 make sure that this person, ah, gets some of this
21 food that we're kicking out on Wednesdays, on
22 Saturdays. And just to name a few of the
23 organizations that are receiving the food and
24 distributing it, as far as our fresh food, ah, we're
25

1 talking about in, let me start in Brooklyn. Ah,
2 Black Veterans for Social Justice as far as getting
3 food out to 10 sites, in Brooklyn and beyond for
4 them. The Brooklyn Veteran Hospital, ah, we're
5 talking Veterans Who Are Still Warriors, the American
6 Legion's Dorie Miller Post 213, the Military Spouses'
7 Association, and Surf Avenue Vets, and that's just
8 Brooklyn. When we look at Queens we're looking at
9 the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5298, Veterans
10 Rebuilding Life, Veterans Inc. Food Pantry, American
11 Legion Post 483. When we look at Staten Island, it's
12 the Community Health Action of Staten Island. So
13 between that group and what is going out through
14 Black Veterans for Social Justice we're getting to
15 Richmond County. When we talk about overall New York
16 City, Harlem Vet Center, Housing Plus NYC, Service
17 for the Underserved, the National Association of
18 Black Military Women, Harlem United, Genesis Veterans
19 Supportive Housing, Sage Vets, Samaritan Village, and
20 I'm from the Bronx, so I have to talk about the
21 Bronx. We're talking about the James J. Peters V.A.
22 Hospital, Bronx Vet Center, American Legion's County
23 Board for Bronx, the American Legion Sam Young Post
24 620, Jericho Project, and Volunteers of America. So
25

1 we're getting it to people any way that we can. So
2 if you're a veteran and we're serving you, one way or
3 another through GetFoodNYC or literally for some
4 fresh chicken and eggs and milk we're gonna get
5 something to you. I hope that, does cover that
6 piece? And I can pass the rest to Cass.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: No,
9 absolutely, absolutely. I just wanted to make sure I
10 just wanted to make sure that we highlighted the fact
11 that, you know, you're directly connected with
12 community-based organizations and groups involved,
13 care organizations, that was, you know, doing a lot
14 of, you know, service directly to, you know, families
15 and veterans and I just wanted to make sure that,
16 that was highlighted, because it's helpful in knowing
17 even as council members who we are supporting and,
18 you know, continuing to help allocate our funding to
19 the [inaudible], so thank you so much.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, we appreciate
21 that. I gotta pass to Cass, which is ironic, too, I
22 just have to call out, you know, a lot of these
23 organizations were at the partner convening back in
24 February that you attended. Just so you know how
25 these things come full circle and this is all one

1
2 team, one fight. It didn't just hit us on the DVS
3 side. It's what you do, it's what the chair does,
4 it's what the other council members do, and we're all
5 trying to attack this and throw everything but the
6 kitchen sink at it. So we appreciate you. Now I'm
7 gonna defer to Cass. She will speak to your
8 questions about, ah, Mission VetCheck and the
9 percentage of responses. She will speak to that
10 question you had about these CUNY student veterans,
11 so, yeah.

12 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Thank
13 you so much, ah, Commissioner. Um, so as we've
14 mentioned, ah, Council Member, we've made over 17,000
15 calls, ah, through Mission VetCheck. About 19% of
16 those calls have been answered. Um, of those 19
17 percentage answer calls, ah, 18% of them had service
18 requests that came back to DVS and were fielded
19 directly by our, ah, our constituent services team.
20 Um, during the pandemic we were able to resolve about
21 95% of those needs requests, which we're very proud
22 of. Um...

23 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: The 95% of
24 the 19%, right?

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS 75
2 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Correct,
3 of the 18%.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Of the 18%.

5 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Yes,
6 exactly. Um, I want to speak to, ah, the value of
7 the resource guide we put together for those
8 volunteers who are making those phone calls. Ah, in
9 addition to the training that those volunteers have
10 undergone. So, um, as the veteran client is engaged
11 by the volunteer on the phone, um, we've equipped our
12 volunteers who provide information in real time. Ah,
13 and to provide resources, ah, around financial
14 assistance, around COVID testing, um, around housing,
15 etcetera. Um, so we are very proud of the fact that
16 our volunteers are sort of this first line of defense
17 and they're able to answer those questions in real
18 time, um, and if that person, again, has more of a
19 complex need that's when it's sent back to our team
20 for triage and response, um, and a referral to
21 another service provider and additional care. Um,
22 does that answer your, your questions, Council
23 Member?

24 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Yeah, I'm
25 good.

1
2 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: OK,
3 thank you. Um, moving on to, to your, um, question
4 regarding, ah, the CUNY students, um, so, you know,
5 we actually held our Veterans on Campus, ah, virtual
6 meeting back on October 7. Um, we were able to
7 engage with about 16 different schools at that
8 meeting. Um, I'm very proud to say that the schools
9 have the largest student veteran populations do have
10 a very close relationship with our office and that
11 includes John Jay, BMCC, Fordham University. Um, we
12 are very close with the CUNY Office of Veterans'
13 Affairs as well. Um, of course there was some
14 concern around BAH, um, and, ah, ah, the policy
15 surrounding the GI Bill benefits, which have been
16 preserved. They will not be reduced. Um, and that
17 is obviously a federal benefit, ah, that Congress was
18 working on, um, and so there was a little concern
19 about...

20 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: You might
21 want to, you might want say what BAH is.

22 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Oh, yes,
23 it's Basic Allowance for Housing.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: I wasn't
25 sure...

2 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: No, no
3 [inaudible].

4 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: ...if
5 Deutsch knows [laughs].

6 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Thanks
7 for checking me on that one. We [inaudible].

8 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: We don't
9 know all the lingo.

10 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Yes, we,
11 we speak in acronyms frequently here. Um, so, you
12 know, we, we supported, ah, Student Veterans of
13 America, ah, and their work in D.C. to ensure that
14 those levels remain, ah, untouched and unreduced, ah,
15 during the duration of the next school year. So
16 that's gonna be in place through December 2021. I
17 think the biggest thing right now that we're seeing
18 is this need for social interaction. It's very
19 difficult for freshmen right now to be starting, ah,
20 school in this type of an environment, um, and we
21 know that community is very important for veterans,
22 especially those who just recently transitioned from
23 the service, um, and so we have, ah, decided to come
24 up with different ways to engage the community, one
25 being, um, this Veterans Voices project, oral history

1
2 initiative that the commissioner mentioned that we
3 just recently launched. Ah, we did two live forums,
4 um, with post-911 veterans who have been able to talk
5 about their experiences in service. Um, so that's
6 just one way we're trying to engage more digitally.
7 I think as the months go on, ah, and as we continue
8 to have these conversations with, um, our partners at
9 the schools, ah, they'll use our office as a conduit
10 to foster that sense of community and connectivity,
11 ah, amongst the student veterans. So we're looking
12 forward to creating more, um, opportunities for us to
13 do that and for them to feel that connectedness
14 during this very challenging time.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: Well, thank
16 you so much, everyone, and thank you for your
17 service. And, um, Chair, thank you for the extra
18 time allotted.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you. You
20 need another 10 minutes, Alicka?

21 COUNCIL MEMBER AMPRY-SAMUEL: [laughs]
22 [inaudible].

23 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Anything else, any
24 other?

25

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS 79
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We have one more,
3 Chair. Next we'll hear from Council Member Vallone.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Thank you, Chair
6 Deutsch. Thank you, Commissioner. Ah, and Alicka, I
7 always love your questions, so you can have my extra
8 time if you need it. Commissioner, I just wanted to
9 follow up on Chair Deutsch's question at the
10 beginning. Um, I guess we've been on this committee
11 now almost seven years and I was disheartened to hear
12 that we're about 15% of contact information for
13 emails, and that's just not a good number. So
14 whatever the exact number is it doesn't really matter
15 'cause we don't have that number. But we know it's,
16 it's not the 200,000 plus and it's somewhere around
17 15,000 to 20,000. So math isn't my major, but that's
18 somewhere less than 20%. How do we fix that, and how
19 do we do that as quickly as possible, because in
20 today's information age and whether it's social
21 media, and I get we're talking about generational
22 issues with the different ages of our veterans
23 committee, um, so some may or may not be as
24 accessible with emails. But we need to get to a
25 place where we're not at 15%. So what is your vision

1 or plan to quickly get us contact information,
2 whether it's a third party or additional, ah,
3 veterans' benefits associations that can do that, but
4 we need to get the number up. So how do you think we
5 can do that?
6

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think, I, I'm,
8 I'm gonna let Cass take a lot of this answer, but I
9 want to, you know, just call out I, I completely
10 agree with where you're coming from, you know,
11 Council Member Vallone. It's funny, when I first
12 joined the Veterans Advisory Board I was asking the
13 same question you asked just now, about, you know,
14 where's the data, what we are doing to get a hold of
15 people, and now in this position I can tell you, um,
16 the number one thing that we want to do [inaudible]
17 V.A. Claims Unit off the ground. The number two
18 thing is something we call Population ID, which is
19 find a way to get as much information about the
20 210,000 as we are able to. And, ah, you know, Cass
21 will speak to it a little more, but to me I look at
22 it as these partnerships with our sister agencies, in
23 other words, if someone else is coming in and saying
24 I'm a veteran to another organization that's
25 affiliated with the City of New York I want us to

1 know about it. If someone is coming as an employee
2 with the City of New York and they're a veteran I
3 want us to know about it and have that information.
4 So it's really those partnerships is one way.
5 Another way is to leverage this...

7 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Commissioner, is
8 there a way to link, I remember you had mentioned
9 when a 311 call comes in for service for a veteran
10 you had said you're not getting that information
11 simultaneously with your agency to get that contact.
12 Can't we make that a mandatory requirement, that,
13 and, and Chair Deutsch and I have been saying this,
14 and other committees, too, it's not just with
15 veterans, that that sharing of critical information
16 from one agency, that interagency cooperation, that
17 we shouldn't have to reinvent the file or the wheel
18 for when someone calls New York City for assistance.
19 Once someone does, whether they're a senior, whether
20 they're a veteran, whether they're looking for
21 housing, or for anything that they're coming to the
22 city for, that information should then be sent to you
23 so that you have that person, that veteran, whether
24 they're looking for housing or food, whether they're
25 temporarily homeless, so that that database is being

1
2 built for you through much larger agencies as 311 is
3 taking that information, so that it eventually gets
4 vetted to you. And I think, from what I'm
5 understanding that's still not happening. Is that
6 something that we can assist you with? We had to do
7 that for Aging through legislation. I had to do that
8 same exact thing and I, I got the same answers, we're
9 trying, we're trying, and finally passed a bill that
10 says no more trying, you have to do it. And it
11 forced, it forced the other agencies that work with
12 you to give you that critical data. Is that
13 something we can do to assist you in this, because it
14 seems like there's data that's being missed at the
15 entry point level that can, that could quickly give
16 you a leg up on, on that information.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So I, um, I think
18 for us it's, you know, right now, and just to clarify
19 the 311 point, trust me, I take you, what you were
20 saying, when it's something that deals with the
21 veteran identity, in other words if someone calls 311
22 and they ask about V.A. benefits, or if they ask
23 about healthcare information for veterans, if they
24 ask about legal assistance for veterans, if they ask
25 about, ah, Vet Connect specifically, you know,

1
2 someone calls and just asks that of 311, if they call
3 about, ah, employment assistance for veterans,
4 etcetera, when it comes and it is dealing directly
5 with the veteran identity we do receive that
6 information. If someone comes, calls for something
7 that's not associated with that identity then we do
8 not receive that information and I cannot confirm
9 that it is [inaudible], so just to be clear about,
10 about that, as far as the data piece. And right now
11 for us what we do is we just, you know, agency by
12 agency we hammer out these agreements to make sure
13 that privacy is accounted for, for that constituent
14 who is a veteran, that we might receive their
15 information.

16 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Well, that might
18 be a way...

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [inaudible] Cass on
20 this. I'm sorry, yeah.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: That might be
22 way, then, that we could address that, that data. So
23 getting even something as simple as somebody's email
24 address might be something that's newly required now,
25 no matter how they're coming through the portal,

1
2 because, ah, you're not alone in that, that this is
3 not your agency's sole issue, this is across the
4 board. It's taken us quite some time to think this
5 is something that's happening. It's, it's refining
6 it, it's slowly happening with the portals being
7 created. But it needs to happen, and especially when
8 we're going through a crisis like we're going through
9 now. We don't have the luxury of, of time to figure
10 it out. So I'm just offering whatever we can do to
11 propel you to get that missing 311, it's good to hear
12 that you're getting most of that, but for some of
13 those few instances that you're not, let's get that
14 to you so you have that overall database and we can
15 easily, between the council members that are on now
16 and the chair and Alicka Samuel we can easily get a
17 piece of legislation through to make sure that sister
18 agencies get you that information [inaudible]. And
19 that would be my [inaudible].

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, I just want to,
21 I, I appreciate you so much for saying these things.
22 I just want to put out there, you know, anyone who
23 asks me I'll tell them the, one of the greatest
24 challenges of this job, the white whale of this job
25 to me is this veteran identification piece. In other

1 words, let's fast forward until we live in a land we
2 have this legislation, everything is on, is set.
3 There, there's still a good number of veterans who
4 don't identify and raise their hand and say that
5 they've served, and that's a larger, deeper issue
6 that we are trying to work on, and a lot of that is
7 just, to fix that it's to be in front of people, it's
8 to be present, it's to speak directly to them. It,
9 it requires old school [inaudible] leadership and,
10 and I, you know, 'cause what happens is how can I
11 help you if you won't even let me know that you were
12 part of the service? We have some veterans, the
13 continuum is everything from I, you know, I'm too
14 proud to, to, not too proud but I'm too humble to
15 admit that I've served. I don't want any special
16 treatment, not for me. I don't want anyone to look
17 at me any differently because I've served. You know,
18 my grandfathers both served in the navy and the army,
19 neither of them would talk about it because they
20 didn't want anyone to, they just didn't want, they
21 didn't want any additional attention. So that's one
22 end of, when someone won't identify. And, and the
23 other...
24
25

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS 86
2 COUNCIL MEMBER VALLONE: Commissioner,
3 what I'll do is, it's certainly not a reflection of
4 what you've done or not done. It's just we're on the
5 same page. So you've got council members here and I,
6 in the last few weeks with DVS it's been difficult to
7 get information. So let's use this time, you know,
8 we've got the holidays upon us, there's gonna be more
9 demand as we come to these colder months dealing with
10 COVID, ah, and as we come out the hardest challenge
11 we had as elected officials when the crisis began was
12 getting information to and from the folks that needed
13 it. So we need that, that communication portal to
14 continue to be open, with the chair and us to work on
15 these things so that we, listen, we don't want to
16 have to write legislation if we don't have to, but
17 sometimes it's the only way to get some folks on the
18 other side to, to listen up. So thank you, Chair,
19 for the time. And I know you've got a busy schedule.
20 But that's where I would like to see this, so that we
21 can leave this when we're done with our term together
22 in a place where that type of portal information is
23 readily accessible. Thank you, Chair.

24 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you very
25 much. So thank you, yeah, thank you, ah, ah, Council

1
2 Member Vallone for your questions and, ah, I want to
3 thank the, ah, Commissioner. I know that you just
4 spoke about, um, those who don't identify themselves
5 as a veteran so you don't know who they are. But we
6 are still dealing with the people who do identify
7 themselves as a veteran. So let's get through that
8 hurdle first. So I wanted to ask, um, I wanted to
9 you, um, now beginning, beginning, ah, at the
10 beginning of the peak of the pandemic has DVS
11 tracked, um, veterans who contracted COVID and, ah,
12 were there any deaths in the veteran community?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, ah, oh, excuse
14 me. Ah, Mr. Chair, we have not tracked the exact,
15 this almost goes back to the same discussion we just
16 had with Council Member Vallone of knowing who is who
17 in the community. But, ah, we have not tracked that
18 specific information. Um, I'm sorry, we have not
19 tracked that. I would always defer to, ah, our
20 colleagues at the Department of Health and Mental
21 Hygiene on that type of information, so, yes.

22 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah, I mean, do
23 you communicate with the V.A. hospitals?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We have checked...

25 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Do they give you...

1
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We have check-ins
3 with our friends at the V.A., and I know that the
4 V.A. has information that's publicly available on,
5 ah, things involving like COVID as it pertains to the
6 various hospitals, but that's, ah, that's separate
7 from, only 30% of veterans use V.A. health care, for
8 instance, and so this goes back to that other issue
9 of identifying our veterans. So we, we don't
10 personally directly track the, ah, COVID data
11 specific to New York City veterans.

12 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: It's concerning
13 because, you know, a veteran who may have PTSD has a
14 lot more challenges than others. So if you have a
15 veteran that goes into a hospital and then comes back
16 out and they are terrified and they have PTSD and
17 they're more terrified, you know, there are more
18 challenges than others, like how do we not track, ah,
19 those veterans who, ah, first of all going through
20 the pandemic, right, um, they would need some type
21 of, you know, ah, resources, mental health resources
22 available to them, and especially if someone ends up
23 in the hospital and comes out, right, it's, it's kind
24 of, ah, traumatic for them to be in the hospital. So
25 how does DVS not communicate with the veteran, with,

1 ah, with the V.A. to find out, I mean, it's a simple,
2 we're not talking about, um, someone who does
3 identify themselves as a veteran, but I believe that
4 probably most veterans end up in the V.A. if, if
5 they, ah, if they contracted COVID. So how does DVS
6 not communicate with the V.A. to find out who may
7 need those additional services?
8

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This, I feel like
10 this keeps touching this other issue of, of personal
11 information, because that's someone's personal health
12 information and so while we know that the V.A. has
13 its numbers available as far as online, you'll be
14 able to see what the, the COVID situation is with the
15 different V.A. hospitals. Ah, to the extent of a
16 V.A. hospital saying hey, City of New York, here is
17 the contact information, the information of all these
18 veterans we've treated with COVID, it's, it's just a,
19 because of privacy concerns and it's health, that's
20 someone's health, ah, information as well. There are
21 justice several barriers for us there. And to be
22 very clear, only 30% of veterans use V.A. health
23 care, so this doesn't fully capture everything,
24 either. So it's just, it's, um, I think for us a lot
25 of it is our mental health-related service providers

1
2 on the VetConnectNYC platform that we look at when we
3 think about people who are dealing with PTSD or have
4 certain, ah, issues where they need to talk to
5 someone, and, and just to name a few of those
6 providers, we have several. You've got the Head
7 Strong Project, you have the Columbia Veterans
8 Research Center. You have the Steven A. Cohen
9 Military Family Clinic at NYU. You have the Weill
10 Cornell Medical College's program for anxiety and
11 traumatic stress. Um, you have the David Lynch
12 Foundation, the Sierra Club Military Outdoors
13 Foundation. There's just so many groups that when
14 something comes on our radar we have a deep bench of
15 partners whom we can send those veterans to. It's
16 just, um, it's just so hard for us to know all things
17 at all times on this subject and we're trying, Mr.
18 Chair.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And all this, um,
20 what are the numbers on how many veterans received,
21 ah, these resources, the mental health resources,
22 from these organizations and not-for-profits you just
23 mentioned?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm, I'm going to
25 defer to, ah, Associate Commissioner Alvarez on that.

1
2 And I just want to point out that in the Local Law 44
3 submission we do provide this information. I know
4 Cass will give you what we've got as best we have
5 now, but know that when the next submission drops,
6 which should be December of this year, that will be
7 publicly available as far as our most recent and
8 updated information about, around mental health and
9 to what we've done in that vein. But I'll, I'll
10 defer to Cass.

11 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Yeah,
12 thank you so much, Commissioner. Um, so we do not
13 have a breakout of mental health requests, ah, right
14 now, but we can circle back. Ah, what I will
15 highlight, though, is the, um, the quality of the
16 phone calls that are being placed through Mission
17 VetCheck. I mentioned before that these are
18 supportive phone calls, um, so there is a mental
19 health aspect to this work in many ways. Ah, we are
20 reducing social isolation, ah, by proactively
21 engaging with members of the vein community. Um,
22 again, I also mentioned that, um, ah, we have a
23 robust resource guide that includes crisis resources,
24 that includes information about GetWellNYC. Um, so,
25 ah, we've got, we've we have sort of this holistic

1
2 360 approach, um, ah, of course, to our outreach as
3 well. Um, we are processing benefits claims, for
4 example. These are all, um, services that, ah, do
5 contribute to one's mental health and well-being.
6 Um, and so I just want to highlight the fact that,
7 um, that our 360 approach really does help, ah, in
8 many ways alleviate some of the stressors that do
9 impact one's mental health. So we can back to you
10 with breakdowns, Chair, ah, but I do want to also
11 point back to the fact that we take a very, ah, 360
12 approach to care and to outreach when we're working
13 with this community.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And all that is
15 done, ah, virtual, right? The mental health
16 resources, everything is virtual. So do you come
17 across...

18 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ:
19 Everything.

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I'm sorry?

21 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Yes,
22 correct, everything is virtual, sir.

23 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible] come
24 across any veterans who don't have a computer, that
25 need access to [inaudible]?

1
2 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Um, I
3 can't speak specifically to any cases that I'm aware
4 of, um, but that was part of the reason why we
5 launched Mission VetCheck. We know that everyone
6 accesses information the same way. Not everybody is
7 on Instagram, not everybody is on, ah, an email list.
8 So that's why we also decided to proactively engage
9 through phone calls. Um, almost everybody, ah,
10 regardless of your age, at least has access to a
11 phone, whether it be a landline or a cell phone, and
12 so that's why we decided to take that approach. We,
13 again, upped our, um, our digital communications
14 during this time. We increased our newsletter, and
15 then to compliment that we're also placing these
16 phone calls.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And, Mr. Chair, I
18 just want to add, when we think of telehealth it's
19 not just the idea of it being done through Zoom or
20 WebAccs or some sort of platform like that. It's
21 also something that can be done telephonically. So
22 when I mentioned those providers or those partners,
23 all of those are open to telephonic treatment if that
24 internet, um, type of service is not available. So
25 someone can have somebody to talk to if need be.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Um, finally, I just
3 want to ask you one other thing about the GI Go Fund.
4 What is that, they do the unemployment, right? They
5 find jobs, what is their purpose, the GI Bill?

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Um, I'll start and
7 I'll pass it over to Cass. So the GI Go Fund is one
8 of our Vet Connect, you know, ah, partners. They're
9 one of the 80-plus service providers we have on Vet
10 Connect, and, you know, employment support is one of
11 several different offerings that they have, so just
12 to, to list that out. Um, I'm going to defer to Cass
13 to add further.

14 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Yeah,
15 thank you, Commissioner. Um, so the Commissioner has
16 referenced Empire Vets previously. Ah, Empire Vets
17 is an initiative of the GI Go Fund. Ah, the GI Go
18 Fund is a vetted service provider in the Vet Connect
19 NYC network, um, and so the Empire Vets job board
20 that was developed, ah, in response to, ah, the
21 unemployment, ah, impacts of COVID-19, ah, is really
22 meant to connect veteran job seekers with, um, jobs
23 in industries that are still hiring, um, and also to
24 expose them to employers that are veteran friendly.
25 Um, all of the job postings on that site come from

1
2 employers that are very interested in bringing
3 veteran talent into their companies. So that's
4 really important for veterans to become educated on
5 because that can help them navigate their job-seeking
6 process. Um, we know that over 5000 jobs have been
7 posted to the site to date. Ah, it's engaged around
8 4000 unique users as well. Um, the GI Go Fund is a
9 full-service organization, so they offer V.A.
10 benefits claims processing, um, financial assistance
11 to veterans, etcetera. Um, so they are a full-
12 service organization, but one component of their work
13 and their specialty, um, is leveraging, ah, Empire
14 Vets, ah, to connect veterans to jobs during this
15 time.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Are they city-
17 funded?

18 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: They are
19 not a city-funded organization, no. They are a
20 private nonprofit organization.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: OK. What are they
22 based out of?

23 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: They're
24 based out of New Jersey. And one thing I also want
25 to point out, Mr. Chair, is that, um, the state of

1
2 New Jersey what, ah, happened in New York with the
3 launch of the Empire Vets website. New Jersey
4 launched Garden State Vets, um, to respond to, ah,
5 the unemployment crisis over in that state as well.
6 So the state worked with the GI Go Fund to launch
7 that site.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible]

9 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: I'm so
10 sorry, I didn't hear you, it cut out.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Um, so when do you
12 refer someone to the, um, when do you, when do you
13 refer someone to the GI Bill fund, um, opposed to the
14 Work Force One when it comes to unemployment, which
15 is a city-funded agency, ah, organization?

16 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: So the
17 outreach around Empire Vets is done so, um, digitally
18 mostly. We proactively push it in our newsletter,
19 um, ah, on our social media. Um, I think it depends
20 on the veteran's need, to be honest with you. Um, it
21 depends on, on, um, what that person is looking for,
22 the level of service that they require, ah, and I'm
23 happy to share that our team is talented enough to
24 make that assessment, um, in addition to
25 VetConnectNYC, which does, which did the same during

1
2 the pandemic. Um, so, you know, if the shoe fits
3 then we will make that, that referral accordingly.
4 And, again, Empire Vets is a digital resource that
5 we've been pushing it.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, I just want to
7 add to that, too. When you look at some of the
8 different platforms, you know, Work Force One is the
9 type of program where we refer a veteran who needs
10 just overall preparation for the job search and have
11 additional counseling, does it get their resume
12 right, does it get [inaudible] skills together,
13 etcetera. And so you can see how Work Force One
14 would fit for someone. Ah, when you look at the
15 Department of Aging Senior Employment Services
16 program, that's a program for a veteran who is 55 or
17 older who lives in the city and is of a certain
18 income level who is looking to get into the work
19 force. It's great for helping that veteran, um,
20 transition into a 21st century job. It's something
21 where they can be able to have that opportunity,
22 being an older citizen in the city. Um, when you
23 look at the NYC At Work program through the Mayor's
24 Office of People with Disabilities, ah, MOPD has
25 identified employers who are very, very much friendly

1
2 to hiring members from the disabled community, and so
3 they explicitly post jobs where they're saying, look,
4 this is for people who are, have disabilities, and so
5 we make sure that folks know about that platform, and
6 I mean, you know, each of the different, you know,
7 ah, organizations that we refer folks to, and it's
8 really, um, we let people know about all of it. You
9 know, when you look at our website and the COVID-19
10 resource page you see all of these, ah, and other
11 programs available there and so for us it's just
12 letting you know, hey, look, here's what's out here
13 in the ecosystem. Please do what you can to take
14 advantage of it, to be able to get back to having
15 income and being able to eat.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: And the, I mean,
17 they're all phenomenal organizations, right? I mean,
18 they're all like do great work.

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yep, that's
20 correct, yeah.

21 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: How many jobs, um,
22 how many jobs were actually found for veterans since
23 March?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is what's, and
25 I'll start and I know Cass can finish it. What's

1
2 difficult with this is to track, you know, did me
3 sending you to the DFTA, you know, Senior Employment
4 Services, you know, program, did that result in you
5 obtaining employment? Are you gonna let me know if
6 it did? Or, you know, better yet, same thing for the
7 MOPD, the Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities,
8 did me letting you know about this opportunity
9 through, you know, [inaudible] or jobs board, did
10 that result in you being employed there? This is a
11 nuanced topic in general to kind of connect the dots
12 with how many people did I help [inaudible]
13 employment out of those who might advertised, and so
14 that's something where it's very nuanced, us getting
15 the data there. We're trying to get a handle on
16 these things, but it's just, it's hard for me to say
17 because you read something on our website and went to
18 go, you know, to this other platform and you got a
19 job that I can then credit that through our outreach.
20 And so that's just something we keep running into as
21 far as, you know, the follow-up on the job, ah, on
22 that, on the job hirings.

23 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: You don't have the
24 numbers?

25

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Ah, that's correct. Not only we don't have the numbers, but many organizations don't have the numbers. This is what I'm saying, like many...

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So we don't know, so we don't know how successful they are, or unsuccessful?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And this, this, it is something we can say across the board for, you know, as far as it, it's difficult to say. If I put a job up from another company and someone takes advantage and gets that job, it's hard for me to know whether I can be attributed to that, that I don't know if it's my influence that led to that happening, or if that's going to be credited to me. And this is not just the City of New York DVS thing. This is a problem in the work force, a challenge in the work force development space in general, to be able to identify efficiency or confirming that, you know, you doing X led to Y as a result.

CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I mean, the truth is you have, I mean, you said you have 210,000 veterans here in New York City, but you don't have information on all the 210,000, so how difficult

1
2 would it be to track, um, the veterans with the
3 information you have on those veterans to see who
4 actually got a job from one of these providers? That
5 shouldn't be difficult. So if, I just want to throw
6 that out. Um, all right, I just want to ask the
7 Commissioner, thank you very much, I want to ask you
8 if you could, ah, give a message, um, to the people
9 watching to veterans and family of veterans, ah,
10 during these trying times, and I know how difficult
11 it is, how you were saying that many veterans who
12 have not identified themselves, ah, to DVS, that you
13 want to encourage them also to identify themselves as
14 a veterans so this way they can take advantage of
15 some of the services that are available. So, um, I
16 just want to ask the people who are watching, um, the
17 people listening, that if you know a veteran and, ah,
18 make sure that they are part of the veteran community
19 and also part of Vet Connect. So I want to ask you,
20 Commissioner, if you can give a message during,
21 during this time and we're still facing its pandemic,
22 ah, here in the city and across the country. Um, so,
23 the floor is yours.

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I, well, first off,
25 thank you so much, ah, Mr. Chair, for just, you know,

1
2 having us come and appear and testify today and being
3 here. And before addressing anyone else, I want to
4 just call you and the other, ah, council members who
5 we couldn't do what we do in the way that we do it
6 but for your support. And we appreciate you for
7 everything. I just want to be very clear about that.
8 Ah, and to all in the veteran community who may be
9 watching this right now, I guess three things I'd,
10 I'd leave with you. You know, one is when in doubt
11 reach out. You know, it can be reaching out to us
12 and, of course, we can be reached at
13 nyc.gov/vetsonline. We can be emailed at
14 connect@veterans.nyc.gov. You know, you can find us
15 on social media, it's @nycveterans. You know, so when
16 in doubt reach out. They could be reaching out to
17 the chair, who has been brilliant in this effort, ah,
18 through his team, or any of the council members. It
19 can be reaching out to your local veteran service
20 organization to just say, hey, you know, what can I
21 do to be able to help others or to be able to help
22 myself, but just, you know, nothing happens if there
23 is not action, and so I would just advise all who can
24 hear this to do what you can to just put one foot in
25 front of the other, if not just to help yourself,

1
2 then help other members of the community. Because
3 that brings me to the second point I would make,
4 which is that, and I tell this over and over and over
5 again, service did not end when you took the uniform
6 off and we are in a crisis right now as a city. We
7 just spent almost two hours talking about all the
8 things going on and everything that everyone's trying
9 to do to get a handle on this so we can continue to
10 help our veterans and their caregivers, survivors,
11 and families. So anyone who has it in their power to
12 give something, anything that you've got, between
13 your time, your talent, your resources, whatever you
14 do, please get in the fight with us because we're not
15 gonna be able to do this by ourselves. We need to
16 work together, everyone, from across all ends of the
17 spectrum. And then, I guess, the, the last thing I'd
18 say is, you know, continue to stay strong. You know,
19 these are very tough times, but we as a community
20 have been through tough times since our existence.
21 What defines us as veterans, not just veterans, but
22 those who support veterans, is this willingness to
23 put everything else above ourselves, even when it's
24 extremely hard, even when everything is on the line,
25 and that's what we're in right now. And so I just

1
2 ask all who are observing this, be it veterans, be it
3 family members, caregivers, survivors, you name it,
4 just continue to endure. We have not, no one would
5 money if they bet against us, 'cause that bet will
6 always be lost and so, you know, it's so important
7 for us to just continue to keep calm and carry on,
8 even in the middle of this pandemic. So, once again,
9 thank you so much, Mr. Chair. We appreciate you. We
10 appreciate, ah, all the other council members, too.
11 And, um, you know, I'll just turn it back over to
12 you. Thank you so much.

13 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you,
14 Commissioner. Thank you for those words, and thank
15 you for your team and for my colleagues. And I just
16 want to end up by saying God bless the United States
17 of America, God bless our military, God bless our
18 veterans, and God bless you all. Thank you very
19 much, Commissioner.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

21 ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER ALVAREZ: Thank
22 you, Mr. Chair.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: OK, ah, we'll now
24 turn to public testimony. Ah, I'd like to remind
25 everyone that unlike our typical council hearings we

1
2 will be calling individuals one by one. Panelists
3 will have three minutes to testify. Council members
4 who have questions for panelists should use the raise
5 hand function in Zoom. And I will call on you, and
6 the panelists have, when the panelist has completed
7 the testimony. For panelists, once your name is
8 called a member of the staff will unmute you and the
9 Sergeant at Arms will give you the go-ahead to begin
10 testimony. Please wait for the Sergeant at Arms to
11 announce that you can begin before delivering your
12 testimony. Our first panel will consist of Allison
13 Messina, Ashton Stewart, Ryan Foley, and Peter
14 Kempner [inaudible] with a bit of a delay.

15 ALLISON MESSINA: Can everyone hear me
16 OK?

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We can hear you.

18 ALLISON MESSINA: Great.

19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

20 ALLISON MESSINA: Good afternoon, Chair
21 Deutsch and fellows City Council members. Thank you
22 for giving me an opportunity to testify today. My
23 name is Allison Messina and I'm the vice president
24 for Work Force Development at Project Renewal, a New
25 York City homeless services nonprofit agency. For

1 more than 53 years Project Renewal has empowered
2 individuals and families who are experiencing
3 homelessness to renew their lives. Each year Project
4 Renewal serves nearly 15,000 New Yorkers, including
5 hundreds of veterans, through our wrap-around
6 services focused on health, homes, and jobs. We are
7 grateful to Speaker Johnson, Chair Deutsch, and the
8 City Council for their generous support of Project
9 Renewal's homeless prevention services for veterans,
10 support that has been crucial for us to help our
11 veterans across all of our programs. We especially
12 thank the City Council for its continued support
13 during the COVID-19 pandemic in the face of such
14 serious fiscal issues and across the board funding
15 cuts. Since the beginning of our fiscal year in July
16 we have served 60 veterans in our housing programs
17 and veterans in our vocational programs, and 86
18 veterans in our healthcare programs. This year our
19 staff has met the unprecedented challenges of the
20 COVID-19 pandemic with unyielding courage,
21 compassion, and professionalism, keeping veterans and
22 other vulnerable New Yorkers safe, healthy, housed,
23 fed, and employed. When the pandemic began we
24 immediately implemented new safety and sanitation
25

1
2 procedures in our shelters and housing programs and
3 we launched on-site COVID test with support from our
4 mobile medical team. To facilitate social
5 distancing, at the city's direction we followed
6 health experts' guidance by relocating more than 800
7 of our shelter clients to four hotels identified by
8 the city. There we have continued providing clients
9 with a wide range of support services they have been
10 receiving at our shelters. As a result, fewer than
11 5% of our more than 2000 shelter clients and housing
12 program residents have tested positive for COVID.
13 Furthermore, at the height of the pandemic our mobile
14 and shelter-based medical programs were on the front
15 lines, providing quality care while easing the burden
16 on our city's overwhelmed emergency rooms. We also
17 expanded our telehealth programs from three providers
18 to 16 to provide uninterrupted medical, mental
19 health, substance use disorder care remotely for more
20 than 1100 clients. We have not paused our work force
21 development programs during the pandemic, either.
22 Since mid March we have placed 210 of our clients
23 into essential jobs. These placements in food
24 delivery, package handling, security, maintenance,
25 they've helped keep the city functioning and enabled

1 our clients to progress towards economic stability.

2 Um, [inaudible] are a social purpose catering
3 company, City Bee Kitchens, which trains and employs
4 formerly homeless New Yorkers...
5

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

7 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Ah, thank you,
8 Allison. How much more do you have to go?

9 ALLISON MESSINA: Ah, not much longer.

10 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Go ahead.

11 ALLISON MESSINA: So, um, at a time of
12 our heightened food insecurity we're now providing
13 more than 5000 daily meals to residents of shelters
14 and transitional housing across the city. As
15 unemployment remains high and the city's economy
16 struggles to recover, the need for continued support
17 for our work force development is especially
18 critical. Project Renewal strongly supports the
19 Department of Veterans Services and values our role
20 as a partner in its mission, and we look forward to
21 working more with the department. I welcome
22 suggestions for further to, ah, greater partnership
23 in the future. In addition, during this
24 unprecedented time we call on all New Yorkers to show
25 compassion for our neighbors experiencing

1
2 homelessness, mental health concerns, substance use
3 disorders, and unemployment. Each of these
4 individuals is a human being with a story being their
5 complex challenges and they deserve all of our
6 support, especially the veterans who have sacrificed
7 so much to help our country. Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you, Allison.
9 Thank you for that beautiful, information, and, um,
10 heartfelt, um, testimony. I couldn't cut you off, I
11 had to let you finish. You're beautiful. Thank you,
12 thank you for all the great work you do on behalf of,
13 ah, Project Renewal.

14 ALLISON MESSINA: Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Next we have Ashton
16 Stewart.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

18 ASHTON STEWART: Good afternoon. Um, can
19 everybody hear me?

20 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yeah.

21 ASHTON STEWART: OK. Um, thank you,
22 Chair Deutsch and members of the Committee on
23 Veterans for this opportunity to testify. Um, we
24 really appreciate your support. Um, SAGEVets is a
25 program for New York State veterans, ah, who are LGBT

1
2 and 50 years or older. Um, it's part of SAGE, which
3 has been around since 1978. It's the largest
4 organization dedicated to improving lives of LGBT
5 adults. Um, it was founded in New York City in 1978.
6 Um, a lot of the issues that we're facing are, ah,
7 were expressed by DVS. Thank you, Commissioner
8 Hendon for, for identifying many of them. Um,
9 SAGEVets was created to identify support and improve
10 access to care among LGBT older veterans across the
11 state in response to the [inaudible] needs. And, in
12 fact, last year alone SAGEVets outreach and program
13 activities reached over 13,000 individuals, 3185 of
14 whom are veterans. Um, in recent months our city and
15 state has struggled during the pandemic and our
16 elders have been forced to endure unimaginable
17 hardships, um, for LGBT elders and older LGBT
18 veterans, many of whom are already struggling with
19 financial insecurity, food insecurity, acute social
20 isolation, um, has been exacerbated by, ah, health
21 disparities presented by the pandemic. Isolation is
22 the underlying root of most of these challenges, um,
23 and while the issue of loneliness is something that
24 older LGBT people have historical had to face, the
25 current reality of sheltering at home has resulted in

1
2 isolation issues that permeate the entire veteran
3 service safety net. Um, that means basically that,
4 ah, other providers are working from home as well and
5 struggling to figure out to deliver their services.
6 So in response, SAGEVets has conducted a vigorous
7 wellness check program, um, to make sure that we are
8 reaching our veterans. Um, we do have the same
9 issues with a lot of our older, ah, veterans who do
10 not use email. We're making telephone calls and
11 printed newsletters, um, our way of communicating and
12 staying in touch with those veterans. Um, we also
13 have, ah, SAGE Connect, which is a new program to
14 provide a little bit of, ah, social support for
15 veterans. We also started to do our veteran support
16 group, ah, telephonically. Um, and the other thing
17 is our legal needs, as we are a legal referral
18 program, um, have escalated. Um, we don't hear a
19 single faceted problem from veterans. They, like we
20 used to, they call now with like a list of things
21 that they need help with, um, and we've really seen a
22 big escalation in the legal needs of elder LGBT
23 veterans. It started at the beginning of the
24 pandemic. Last year we made 44 legal referrals and
25 26 of those were between March and September. Um,

1
2 and given the reduction in staff of a lot of the
3 legal providers, we've had to be a little innovative,
4 um, in our approach. We've been getting a lot of
5 Legal Aid counsel from, ah, legal partners such as
6 State Division of Veteran Services.

7 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

8 ASHTON STEWART: OK. Thank you. Can I
9 just have another couple minutes? Ah, one minute,
10 maybe? Um, so, ah, one in particular was a
11 guardianship case that we had to put together, ah, a
12 guardian was not doing the, the right service for the
13 elder LGBT, a Vietnam veteran. Um, so we put
14 together an order to show cause with the counsel
15 provided by the State Division of Veteran Services
16 and successfully got a hearing at the State Supreme
17 Court. He now has a new guardian. Um, we also are
18 helping a veteran who reached out to us after hearing
19 about the restoration of Honor Act who was in
20 desperate need of health care and ineligible because
21 he has an other than honorable discharge and was
22 discharged a few months shy of the two-year period
23 where you are supposed to, um, achieve to get, ah,
24 access to the V.A. We are going, ah, up to the state
25 level right now and pursuing that to get him the

1 health care he needs. Um, we're just so grateful for
2 the support. And I just wanted to mention, um, I've
3 got a couple notes here. There was a bill that's in
4 the state capitol right now where DVS is being asked
5 to share DD214s with veterans in New York State. Um,
6 I think that maybe it would be interesting to find
7 out if they have access to these DD214s, do they also
8 have a list of all the veterans in New York State,
9 including New York City? Um, that bill is S7051A,
10 um, and in the Assembly A0A8002A, sponsored by Brooks
11 and Jean Pierre. Um, ah, senator and assembly
12 member, respectively there. Um, and the restoration
13 of Honor Act is a way of finding these veterans who
14 don't yet identify or wear their identify as a
15 veteran. Those who were discharged with other than
16 an honorable discharges, for sexual orientation, or
17 gender identity, military sexual trauma, TBI or PTSD.
18 We are hearing from veterans already who are reaching
19 out to their elected officials and then they are
20 referring them to us. I think this is such a
21 opportunity to promote this legislation, to find
22 those veterans and, um, maybe increase the, the
23 database that we're all working with here. The last
24 thing I'm gonna say is Veterans' Day is coming up.
25

1
2 We are preparing a big program to address some of the
3 history of the discrimination that's occurred in the
4 military and the huge progress that the military has
5 gone through with ending of Don't Ask Don't Tell, and
6 the committees that we're serving on as SAGEVets,
7 we're encouraging those leaders of those communities
8 to further diversify and then make sure that women
9 veterans, LGBT veterans, and black veterans are all
10 seated at the table to make sure that we're all
11 getting represented equally. Thank you so much for
12 this opportunity, and I'll leave it, leave it at
13 that.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you, Ashton.
15 Thank you very much.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. I'd like
17 to remind all council members if they have questions
18 for panelists, ah, to use the raise hand function in
19 Zoom. Ah, our next panelist will be Ryan Foley.

20 RYAN FOLEY: Hello, Chair Deutsch,
21 council members, and staff. Good afternoon, and
22 thank you for this opportunity to speak to the
23 Veterans Committee about the needs of veterans during
24 COVID-19. My name is Ryan Foley and I'm the
25 supervising attorney of the Veterans Practice at New

1
2 York Legal Assistance Group, NYLAG, a nonprofit law
3 office dedicated to providing free legal services in
4 civil matters to low-income New Yorkers. Given the
5 level of need in New York City's diverse veteran
6 population, NYLAG operates two veteran-specific legal
7 programs. Our Legal Help Veterans Initiative
8 operates legal clinics within the Bronx and Manhattan
9 V.A. Medical Centers, including the nation's first
10 legal clinic focused entirely on women veterans. Our
11 veterans' practice is a community-based program with
12 a large referral network that provides comprehensive
13 services to veterans and their families regardless of
14 their discharge status and eligibility to use the
15 V.A. healthcare system. NYLAG is grateful to the
16 City of New York for its investment in legal services
17 for veterans over the past several years. NYLAG has
18 been the recipient of funding through the legal
19 services for veteran initiatives since its inception
20 and has assisted veterans with thousands of cases in
21 the areas of veterans' benefits, public benefits,
22 housing, consumer protection, advanced planning, and
23 many more. Recently NYLAG was granted funding from
24 NYC's Department of Veterans Services to assist
25 veterans who require discharge upgrades due to

1 receiving less than honorable discharges for issues
2 such as their sexual orientation, sexual trauma, or
3 traumatic injury. Still, services for veterans have
4 not been spared from budget cuts implemented during
5 this difficult time. NYLAG's legal services for
6 veterans funding was slashed by 32% in this new
7 budget, which will allow us to serve fewer veterans
8 this year, despite the many obstacles they face every
9 day, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
10 COVID-19 has certainly brought new challenges, but
11 more so it has compounded the already serious
12 economic and mental health challenges that New York's
13 veterans faced prior to the pandemic. NYLAG provides
14 legal assistance to low-income veterans and their
15 families because we know as a poverty fighting tool
16 it works. Benefits and claims assistance is the top
17 cited need for veterans in military households. 71%
18 of veteran and military households have experienced a
19 civil or legal program in the last year. And the
20 most common civil legal issues faced are eviction and
21 foreclosure, benefits access, child support, and
22 license restoration. Yet despite this significant
23 need 88% of low-income veterans and military
24 personnel reported receiving inadequate or no
25

1 professional legal help for their civil legal
2 problems. NYLAG and our legal service colleagues
3 throughout the city attempt to fill the gap, though
4 limited funding keeps us from fully closing it.
5 Despite resource constrictions, we have made every
6 effort to meet the initial challenges caused by the
7 pandemic. At NYLAG we established a COVID-19 legal
8 resource hotline to provide answers to pandemic-
9 related legal questions. Through this hotline we
10 have assisted more than 2000 individuals and their
11 families, including veterans, with advanced planning,
12 unemployment, and public benefit issues, and housing
13 concerns, among many others. On the national stage,
14 in mid March we led nationwide advocacy efforts,
15 demand the V.A. take quick and decisive action to
16 preserve veterans' health and benefit rights during
17 the pandemic.

18
19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

20 RYAN FOLEY: May I have another minute?

21 Housing remains the foremost critical issue for
22 veterans. While some progress have been made towards
23 ending veteran homelessness overall, shelters have
24 seen a rise in veterans during this national EMR.
25 With estimates of nearly 25% of New York City renters

1 not current on rent, much of the burden of addressing
2 eviction prevention and preserving veteran
3 homelessness from increasing will fall on legal
4 services providers. Employment issues are another
5 higher area of concern. Approximately one-third of
6 the callers to NYLAG's COVID-19 hotline came to us
7 because they have lost their jobs or could not safely
8 return to their jobs due to the pandemic and require
9 assisting navigating unemployment benefits and paying
10 rent and bills. Based on analysis of industries hit
11 hardest by COVID-19, it is estimated that 14% of all
12 veterans employed before the pandemic have lost work.
13 Since veterans began their careers later and have an
14 education and career background that doesn't always
15 translate to civilian employment, on average it often
16 takes longer for veterans to find new work. These
17 veterans will need legal advocates to help them
18 navigate the unemployment system and to access via
19 education job training or monetary benefits until
20 they can get back to work. To address these critical
21 needs it's essential that the City Council and the
22 administration continue funding that allows NYLAG and
23 others civil legal providers to help New York City
24 veterans make it through this difficult time. While
25

1
2 we recognize the extraordinary challenging budget
3 position that the city is in, it is essential that
4 veterans have access to quality free civil legal
5 services. And as New York works to recover from the
6 impact of COVID-19, civil legal services will be a
7 crucial component to helping veterans get back on
8 their feet, and city support for the civil legal
9 service organizations will make a difference for
10 veterans who need an advocate on their side. Thank
11 you for the opportunity to testify today. We look
12 forward to engaging in further discussions about
13 serving our veteran communities and improving their
14 access to critical legal services and other
15 resources. I would be happy to answer any questions.

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you, Ryan.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. The next
18 panelist will be Peter Kempner.

19 PETER KEMPNER: Thank you. My name is..

20 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

21 PETER KEMPNER: Thank you. Ah, good
22 afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner and I am the
23 legal director of Volunteers of Legal Service, also
24 known as VOLS. VOLS was established in 1984 and our
25 purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide

1 free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help
2 fill the justice gap. We thank the City Council for
3 holding this hearing to examine the needs of veterans
4 in the wake of COVID-19. My testimony focuses on two
5 legal issues faced by New York City veterans in the
6 wake of the crisis. And, more important, and how it
7 is more important than ever to ensure that veterans
8 have access to free legal services in order to fend
9 off potential devastation. These two issues are
10 eviction and homelessness prevention, and the second
11 is end of life planning and planning for incapacity.
12 Prior to COVID-19 outbreak VOLS Veterans' Initiative
13 conducted free weekly legal clinic in the Manhattan
14 V.A. Hospital, where we provided free civil legal
15 services to low-income veterans age 60 and over.
16 After the crisis shut down the V.A. hospital to
17 outside visitors, we moved our services online and
18 launched a legal telephone hotline for low-income
19 elderly veterans. The number one legal issue faced
20 by veterans we serve is eviction and homelessness
21 prevention. Over the past decade New York City
22 working alongside legal service providers with New
23 York City Department of Veterans Services, veteran
24 services organizations, the V.A., and other community
25

1
2 partners has made tremendous strides in addressing
3 veteran homelessness. Using federally funded
4 programs like supported services for veterans'
5 families, HUD-VASH Section 8, the grants of per diem
6 program in combination with local initiatives like
7 Universal Access to Counsel Program, New York City
8 has cut its veteran homeless population
9 significantly. This crisis has the potential to undo
10 much of the progress we have made and return us to
11 [inaudible] where veteran homelessness was much more
12 pronounced and widespread. It is estimated that tens
13 of thousands of New Yorkers may face homelessness
14 when the current pauses on eviction filings and
15 executions of warrants are lifted. There is no doubt
16 that there are scores of veterans amongst those
17 facing homelessness and many of these veterans are
18 those who are most vulnerable. They are veterans who
19 suffer from service-connected disabilities, veterans
20 with history of substance abuse, veterans with mental
21 health disabilities, and veterans who were formerly
22 homeless. If evicted many of these veterans will
23 end up in shelters or on the streets. Homeless
24 shelters have proven to be a hotbed of COVID-19
25 spread and they've put these veterans at risk of

1 death. The best way to prevent a backslide on
2 veteran homelessness is to ensure that it does not
3 happen in the first place. This means doing
4 everything we can to prevent eviction of veteran
5 tenants, which must include making sure that these
6 veterans have access to free legal services in the
7 event they are facing an eviction filing. It has
8 been proven that tenants who are represented by
9 council, ah...

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

12 PETER KEMPNER: Can I have another
13 minute, Council Deutsch?

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Yes.

15 PETER KEMPNER: Thank you. Ah, it has
16 been proven that tenants who are represented by
17 counsel in an eviction proceeding are much more
18 likely to be able to remain in their homes. Having
19 access to counsel ensures that these veterans will be
20 able to take advantage of the protections provided by
21 the New York State Safe, Tenants' Safe Harbor Act,
22 and they will be able to better access grants and
23 other programs to help them pay off rent arrears and
24 will ensure that their rights are protected. The
25 next issue I want to address is to make sure that the

1 veterans who are most vulnerable to poor health
2 outcomes if infected with COVID-19 could engage in
3 proper life planning. A core part of our work is to
4 provide free wills and advanced directives to low-
5 income senior veterans. These are critical documents
6 to ensure that the wishes of senior veterans are
7 clear and they are carried out by the people that
8 they love and trust the most. Veterans infected with
9 COVID-19 may find themselves in a medically induced
10 coma, on a ventilator for weeks or months, and during
11 this time their rent will go unpaid, bills will pile
12 up, and loved ones will be forced to file costly and
13 unpleasant legal proceedings, like a guardianship,
14 when a veteran is placed, is completely incapacitated
15 in the long term. A veteran who has the ability to
16 put in a proper plan by completing a power of
17 attorney, a healthcare proxy, and other advanced
18 directives can ensure that the negative collateral
19 consequences of incapacity are minimized and
20 potentially avoided by empowering their loved ones
21 with the proper tools to handle their affairs while
22 they battle the virus. They can focus on healing
23 instead of worrying about whether they will have a
24 home to return to when they are released from the
25

1 hospital. The common thread that brings these issue
2 together is how access to free legal counsel is
3 transformative for veterans in need. From eviction
4 prevention to life planning to accessing government
5 benefits and on so many other fronts, having access
6 to free legal services is an important tool in our
7 toolkit to help abate the negative impact of COVID-
8 19, of the COVID-19 crisis on the New York veteran
9 community. Thank you for allowing us to submit this
10 testimony and for holding this important hearing.

11
12 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: All right, thank
13 you, Peter, thank you for the testimony.

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Not
15 seeing any hands, we will now move to panel two.
16 Panel two will consist of Avi Gross and Tamaka
17 Tawaki, oh, excuse me, Tamaka Kowamatsu, excuse me if
18 mispronounce your name, and Cosin Vetcong. And we
19 have Avi first. Avi Gross can go first.

20 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

21 AVI GROSS: Thank you, Chair Deutsch,
22 Council Members Ampry-Samuel and Vallone. In my more
23 than two years of military service I encountered a
24 lot of darkness. The first time in my life I
25 encountered hatred from people whose sole purpose it

1 was to inflict harm and destruction on others. I
2 also encountered severe social injustice when people
3 were deprived of fundamental human rights. But worst
4 of all was what every soldier unfortunately
5 encounters in the military, which is an extraordinary
6 indifference to human suffering, especially from
7 those public officials with resources and mandate to
8 help those that are suffering and can help those who
9 are suffering, but choose not to. All of the
10 indifference to human suffering that I encountered in
11 my military experience is dwarfed in comparison to
12 the extraordinary indifference to human suffering
13 myself and my ill mother continue to experience from
14 New York City housing agencies. It takes
15 respectfully an extraordinary degree of cruelty to
16 observe another human being suffering during the
17 pandemic and choose indifference over compassion,
18 common sense, and [inaudible] interest of justice.
19 From September 23, 2019, when I was first forced into
20 public shelter as a direct result of the
21 unconscionable conduct of our city agencies I've been
22 battling on and off homelessness, along with many
23 other troubling issues. The reality is that hundreds
24 of vacant apartments for which I am eligible based on
25

1
2 any standard of calculation, those solutions are
3 readily available. But the indifference to human
4 suffering by clear and convincing evidence is
5 motivated simply by a breach of integrity of public
6 officials who are aware of the problem, who see the
7 problem, but who refuse to intervene. I'd just like
8 to share two examples of quotes that were issued by
9 the housing agencies, the commissioner, Louis Carol,
10 on May 30, on May 30, 2020, um, released in a public
11 statement this is a time to help families out of the
12 shelter system in a bigger way than we've done
13 before. Then I'll...

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

15 AVI GROSS: I'd just like to complete
16 this point, please.

17 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Go ahead.

18 AVI GROSS: Um, she wrote, we are pleased
19 to introduce new changes to the Housing Connect
20 lottery process aimed at moving New Yorkers into
21 stable affordable housing as quickly as possible
22 during the COVID crisis and beyond. We are committed
23 to working with developers and marketing agents to
24 expedite the leasing of developments while
25 maintaining a clear consistent process and strong

1
2 protections for applicants. Um, respectfully,
3 honorable Chair, anyone, any reasonable human being
4 that just looks at the facts of my application and
5 sees what happens, um, just very, very briefly, 99%
6 of the applicants were rejected except almost all of
7 the apartments have gone to family, friends, and
8 other unqualified candidates. Anyone who looks at
9 these facts is deeply disturbed how this could
10 happen, how this could happen to someone who is a
11 law-abiding citizen, how people could be so
12 indifferent during the pandemic. And this is my last
13 point. When the pandemic started and I was homeless
14 I reached out to almost every council member of the
15 51 councils. 90% of them unfortunately didn't
16 respond. The most responsive council member from all
17 51 was, um, Chair Deutsch, who, um, I believe his
18 name was Mr. Plushnik, who reached out, who took a
19 look at the evidence, who actually put me in touch
20 with a lawyer, um, and I am deeply grateful for that
21 help. The problem is that there aren't enough
22 council members like you, Chair Deutsch, because
23 anyone who looks at my situation is deeply, deeply
24 horrified and, I mean, the injustice is, is just
25 incomprehensible and I know in my heart that you are

1
2 a person of integrity. All I ask for is the chance
3 to communicate to you a harrowing social injustice
4 that is respectfully motivated only by greed. That,
5 that is the bottom line here. Thank you for your
6 time. Thank you for your consideration. I forgot to
7 mention that here, um, ah, on the other side you have
8 the HPD project manager who rejected me after I was
9 approved and he happens to, um, conveniently own a
10 couple of those affordable apartments. He's the
11 rule, not the exception. Thank you for giving me
12 more time. Thank you for your compassion. Please
13 find it in your heart to reach out.

14 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you, Avi.
15 Um, I'm gonna have, um, my director of Veteran
16 Affairs, Joe Bello, he's going to reach out to you.
17 I don't think you have been in touch with him.

18 AVI GROSS: No.

19 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: So, um, if you
20 could, ah, um, we're gonna have to circle back and
21 figure out a way to get the information or, um, reach
22 out to Jack.

23 AVI GROSS: Thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: OK. We'll have Joe
25 Bello, ah, reach out to you.

2 AVI GROSS: Thank you, sir.

3 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Thank you, Avi.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. The next
5 person on our panel is Tawaki Komatsu.

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

7 TAWAKI KOMATSU: Can you...

8 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Where's your mask?

9 TAWAKI KOMATSU: Don't need it. Ah, but
10 can you hear me?

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I can hear you.

12 TAWAKI KOMATSU: Um, so Mr., ah, Mr.
13 Deutsch, um, I've previously testified in your
14 hearings. I've talked about the needs of other
15 military veterans who live in the building in which I
16 reside. Um, there was a death in my building on
17 August 11 of this year. I think I've previously
18 asked you if you could get me the documents from HRA
19 to let me know to what extent HRA is responsible for
20 providing oversight of Urban Pathways, the landlord
21 of the building. The point is, I sent an email, ah,
22 message to Commissioner Banks, Steven Banks of HRA,
23 as well as Anne Marie Scalia of HRA, on August 3
24 about the need for this disabled military veteran to
25 have an air conditioner installed in his apartment.

1
2 Um, however, the fire department came to the building
3 on August 11, broke down his front door, and rolled
4 out his body. So the question is if people are
5 coming to your hearings, are testifying lawfully,
6 truthfully in your hearings and we're apprising you
7 of these major problems, um, why is it exactly that
8 there's nothing being done? Um, also, ah, two other
9 people, they told me of problems in the building.
10 They told me there's a leak from the roof that are
11 going into their apartments, damaging their property
12 in the building. Somebody told me yesterday that is
13 closed or damaged because of a leak in the roof
14 that's spreading into his apartment. I've reported
15 this problem to HPD previously, repeatedly, and it's
16 still an issue. So the question is, like I said, I
17 don't mean to waste your time, but if I'm, you know,
18 advocating for other people in my building instead of
19 myself why is it exactly that there's nothing being
20 done? Um, also there was some mention earlier today
21 during today's hearing about services for the
22 underserved and I guess, ah, employment assistance,
23 ah, food assistance for military veterans. That's
24 just not happening. Um, with regards to services for
25 the underserved, I previously testified to you that I

1 was assaulted in the building in which I reside. I
2 reported that, an attempted assault against me, to
3 Molly McCracken of Services for the Underserved on
4 May 12 of 2016. Nothing was done. I got 15 punches
5 to my left temple on July 2 of 2016. So I guess the
6 question is why is it exactly that the City of New
7 York is continuing to do business with Services for
8 the Underserved after I took 15 punches to my left
9 temple only because no one from that organization
10 intervened. I mean, am I out of line here or am I,
11 you know, conducting myself in a lawful, proper
12 manner? Um, so I guess to try to close out this
13 testimony, can I get a commitment, a firm commitment
14 from you today during this hearing to have proper
15 assistance provided to other military veterans in my
16 building? That's a fair question.

18 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Tawaki? Yeah, OK,
19 so, Tawaki, first of all, I ask the questions. Um,
20 I've heard what you said and I've told you in the
21 past...

22 TAWAKI KOMATSU: The only thing, one of
23 the things, Mr. Deutsch...

24 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I, I heard you in
25 the past and I asked you just to have those tenants

1 reach out to my office, and I have a, ah, outstanding
2 person, Joe Bello, who will help them, and as far as
3 I know the other tenants in the building are not
4 looking for an advocate, um, not looking for you to
5 talk on behalf of them. So, and I told you every
6 hearing that you need to have them reach out to me
7 directly. This way I can [inaudible].

9 TAWAKI KOMATSU: I did, but this person
10 passed away, he's dead, he cannot reach out to you.

11 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: Well, I have, well,
12 unfortunately if the person passes away they can't
13 reach out to me. But I told you back in 2016...

14 TAWAKI KOMATSU: And someone else that
15 you...

16 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: [inaudible] reach
17 out to me. I appreciate, ah, Tawaki if there's any
18 issues you can send an email. We always respond.
19 Thank you so much. Anybody else?

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I think that
21 concludes public testimony. Ah, if we've
22 inadvertently missed anyone, ah, that would like to
23 testify, please use the Zoom raise hand function and
24 we will call you in the order your hand is raised.

1
2 Not seeing any raised hands. Chair Deutsch, we have
3 concluded public testimony for the hearing.

4 CHAIRPERSON DEUTSCH: I want to thank, I
5 just want to thank all the advocates, um, who took
6 the time to testify, although they didn't have to
7 take the train or a car or bus to come down to City
8 Hall and have to go look for parking or take the
9 hassle of public transportation that we have now, but
10 I just want to thank everyone for taking their time.
11 I want to thank also my colleagues, ah, who've been
12 on it, in particular Alicka Ampry-Samuel, whose
13 husband is a veteran, ah, for being on this hearing
14 from the beginning all the way to the end, so thank
15 you, Alicka, ah, for being on it. And, once again, I
16 want to thank all the advocates who continue doing
17 the great work they all do on behalf of the veterans
18 and, ah, I just want to mention again to Avi, ah,
19 that we'll circle back with you, we'll have Joe
20 Bello. I'm sorry what you, what you're going
21 through, but we'll have Joe Bello reach out to you
22 and, ah, if you have my email on hand you can just
23 shoot me an email and I'll send it over to Joe, who
24 will reach out to you. But when it comes to anyone,
25 especially a veteran, you reach out to my office, um,

1
2 I think that everyone gets a response from me. Um, I
3 monitor my emails myself and, and I have a great
4 staff. I want to thank my staff, my entire staff,
5 for always being available. Um, you know, people
6 say, oh, you're working from home, you're working
7 virtually, it's, it's, sometimes it's a lot more
8 difficult being home and staying home and not being
9 able to go out and in quarantine most of the time
10 than running around and being in the office and being
11 out and about. So I want to thank my staff once
12 again for all of the work that they do, um, literally
13 24/7. You know, there's no time limit of, of when
14 our jobs and our work ends, because people are
15 suffering, people need help, and, ah, the only thing
16 we can do is respond and try to get results, um, and
17 to the veteran community, hang in there and we'll do
18 everything, doing everything possible with those who
19 gave us the, um, the American dream for living here
20 in the United States of America, living here in New
21 York City. So I want to thank all the veterans out
22 there. Um, thank you, you're not forgotten. We
23 appreciate everything you continue to do and helping
24 other veterans getting the services and the resources
25 that they truly deserve. And we cannot, um, we don't

1 know, I mean, if you're a not a veteran and you
2 didn't serve in the military you don't know, um, the
3 life of a person that served in the military and that
4 lives here, ah, or anywhere in the world who is a
5 veteran and the work and the things you have seen
6 throughout your life and, um, and experiences that
7 you had and some of the experiences no one should
8 ever know of, ah, watching your partners, watching
9 your friends getting killed and shot in the line of
10 fire. So I want to thank you all. And we do
11 appreciate you. We appreciate each and every one of
12 you. So God bless you all, God bless the veterans,
13 and, once again, God bless the United States of
14 America. Thank you. And this meeting is now
15 adjourned.
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

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 December 15, 2020