

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION  
JOINTLY WITH THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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B E F O R E: CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA (IMMIGRATION)  
CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ (VETERANS)

COUNCIL MEMBERS: CARLOS MENCHACA  
ERIC DINOWITZ  
ALICKA AMPRY-SAMUEL  
MARGARET CHIN  
ALAN MAISEL  
SELVENA BROOKS-POWERS  
DANIEL DROMM  
FRANCISCO MOYA  
OSWALD FELIZ  
PAUL VALLONE  
MATHIEU EUGENE

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

ASSEMBLY MEMBER CATALINA CRUZ  
AMAURI ESPINAL  
TOM TORTORICI

MARGARET STOCK  
YESENIA MATA  
CESAR VARGAS  
COCO CULHANE



2

3 SGT. BIONDO: Recording to the computer  
4 has begun.

5 SGT. PEREZ: Recording to the cloud is  
6 rolling and so is the backup. I will start with the  
7 opening. Good morning. Welcome to the New York City  
8 Council's remote committee hearing on Immigration  
9 jointly with the Committee on Veterans. Everyone  
10 please turn on your video at this time. Silent all  
11 electronic devices. All written testimony can be  
12 submitted to [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). That is  
13 [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). Thank you. Chair  
14 Menchaca, we're ready to begin.

15 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Buenos Dias  
16 everyone. Thank you all for joining us. My name is  
17 Carlos Menchaca and I am the Chair of the New York  
18 City Council's Committee on Immigration. We are  
19 joined today by, for the first time ever, the  
20 Committee on Veterans, chaired by my colleague and  
21 friend Council Member Eric Dinowitz. I'd like to  
22 acknowledge the members that are here today. We'll  
23 be acknowledging you throughout the course of the  
24 hearing, but as of now, we are joined by Council  
25 Members Ampry-Samuel, Chin, and Maisel. We are

2 really, really excited that the members of both  
3 committees are here today to discuss a very important  
4 conversation. You know, as we so often do in the  
5 Immigration Committee, I want to focus in on a subset  
6 of immigrant population, immigrant neighbors,  
7 immigrant New Yorkers that are particularly  
8 vulnerable and discuss what unique issues they are  
9 facing here in our city so that we can ensure that  
10 their concerns are heard by our administration and  
11 discuss how we, as a city, can improve access to city  
12 services. Today's we'd like to discuss foreign-born  
13 members of the United States Armed Forces. Immigrant  
14 have long enlisted in all branches of the U.S.  
15 Military beginning with the Revolutionary War.  
16 Immigrant represented half of all military recruits  
17 by the 1840s, and 20 percent of the 1.5 million  
18 services in the Union Army during the Civil War.  
19 Today, the number of veterans who were born outside  
20 the United States stand at approximately 530,000,  
21 representing three percent of all 18.6 million  
22 veterans nationwide. Additionally, almost 1.9 million  
23 veterans are the US-born children of immigrants.  
24 Currently, naturalized citizens, lawful permanent  
25 residents and some Pacific Islanders are permitted to

2 enlist. I want to give a shoutout to all those who  
3 are listening who are veterans and thank you  
4 personally for your service. I especially want to  
5 thank my brother, Abraham Menchaca who served two  
6 tours; one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, and to all  
7 our brothers and sisters and family members who  
8 serve. Recognizing immigrant's honorable service in  
9 World War I, Congress changed laws to make it easier  
10 for immigrant serving in the military to become  
11 naturalized citizens. This included policies such as  
12 authorizing immigration officials to naturalize  
13 member of the armed forces while they were overseas,  
14 and expedited naturalization processes for non-  
15 citizens who served honorably in the armed forces  
16 after 9-11. The Bush and the Obama Administrations  
17 further enhanced these policies making it easier for  
18 non-citizens to join the armed forces and for them to  
19 receive expedited citizenship for their honorable  
20 service. However, the Trump Administration attacked  
21 many of these policies, eliminated military  
22 naturalization resources and created barriers to  
23 prevent expedited citizenship for service members.  
24 Unfortunately, some service members were even  
25 deported by the same nation they took an oath to

2 defend. This is unacceptable, and thankfully, the  
3 Biden Administration recently directed USCIS, ICE,  
4 and CBP to immediately conduct a review of these  
5 barriers and federal legislation was also introduced  
6 by Congress to protect non-citizen veterans from  
7 deportation. However, much damage has been done, and  
8 due to all the barriers that the Trump Administration  
9 put into place, there have been significant declines  
10 in the number of service members applying for and  
11 earning U.S. citizenship through military service.  
12 In fact, the Military Times reported a 65 percent  
13 decline in May of 2018. Furthermore, the rate of  
14 denial of military naturalization applications was  
15 significantly higher than the rate of denial for  
16 civilian naturalization applications. We owe it to  
17 our service members who put their lives on the line  
18 to protect our country and our well-being to ensure  
19 that they are treated fairly and that they are able  
20 to access the benefits that they are entitled to.  
21 You know, I look forward to this hearing, from the  
22 Administration, they will be testifying today about  
23 how we are serving our foreign-born veterans, and  
24 what more we can do to ensure that they have the  
25 resources they need to access the benefits that they

2 deserve. Now, I am grateful to DVS and MOIA for  
3 being present today, and I'm hoping that we hear some  
4 commitments about how we can double down utilizing  
5 the resources that we have currently and potentially  
6 new resources to address these unique needs. Now, I  
7 want to say thank you to the staff who put this  
8 together. They are behind the scenes, and they are  
9 doing some incredible work as we wrap up the  
10 immigration work. This is not my last hearing, but  
11 we are in the final stretch, and this committee staff  
12 has been incredible working around the clock.  
13 Committee Counsel Harbani Ahuja as well as my Chief  
14 of Staff Loren Alucero (SP?) and Legislative Director  
15 Cesar Vargas (SP?). You're going to hear from him  
16 later today as well. He's been pretty central as  
17 someone who is part of the armed forces as well. I  
18 also want to thank the Veterans Committee Staff,  
19 Counsel Bianca Vitale (SP?); Paul Stanlus (SP?),  
20 Elizabeth Parks (SP?), and with that, I want to hand  
21 it over to my co-chair for today, and this is a  
22 historic moment that we are bringing these two  
23 committees together, and I can't wait to be joining  
24 our ideas and thoughts in this hearing. Chair  
25 Dinowitz.

2 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Thank you, Chair  
3 Menchaca. I'm also looking forward to this hearing,  
4 of this very important topic. Well, my name is Eric  
5 Dinowitz, Council Member from the Bronx and Chair of  
6 the New York City Council's Committee on Veterans.  
7 I'd also like to just first recognize other council  
8 members who have joined us. Council Member Brooks-  
9 Powers, Council Member Dromm, Council Member Moya,  
10 Council Member Feliz, and Council Member Vallone. I  
11 want to thank you all for joining us at today's  
12 hearing with the Committee on Immigration about city  
13 services for foreign-born service members, veterans,  
14 and military families. I also want to extend a warm  
15 welcome to all of the services members, veterans, and  
16 military families with us here today. Veteran's Day  
17 is fast approaching, and I want to acknowledge that  
18 this is a day where we celebrate and honor all of  
19 America's veterans for their love of country and  
20 willingness to serve for the common good. The  
21 commitment of our foreign-born service members  
22 represents extraordinary patriotism, and our country  
23 should recognize this contribution by offering a  
24 clear path to citizenship. The service of immigrants  
25 in the United States Military is an honored tradition

2 dating back to the Revolutionary War. Foreign-born  
3 service members which include naturalized citizens  
4 and non-citizens have fought in every major conflict  
5 in American History. Hundreds of thousands of  
6 immigrants pledged to defend the United States with  
7 their lives in the Civil War, both World Wars, the  
8 conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq just to  
9 name a few. Over the last century, military service  
10 has provided a pathway to American citizenship for  
11 more than 760,000 foreign-born service members. This  
12 long-standing policy allowing immigrants to earn U.S.  
13 citizenship through military service has enhanced  
14 military readiness and strengthened national security.  
15 In recent years, however, naturalizations of non-  
16 citizen service members have decreased significantly.  
17 Many non-citizen service members have reported  
18 encountered numerous obstacles to naturalizing.  
19 While in the service, including prolonged eligibility  
20 for certification of military service and the closing  
21 of many international field offices that provide  
22 immigration assistance to service members abroad.  
23 Barriers to naturalization prevents service members  
24 and veterans who have honorably served and fought in  
25 combat overseas from accessing critical benefits and

2 much needed public services. Adding insult to  
3 injury, non-citizen veterans can and have been  
4 deported by the same nation they took an oath to  
5 defend. We have an obligation to care for non-  
6 citizen service members and veterans who risked their  
7 lives defending this nation and who may continue to  
8 live with health conditions because of their time in  
9 service. The objective of today's hearing is to  
10 examine the issues affecting the continuing ability  
11 of immigrants to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces of  
12 the United States. It is our duty as a city to help  
13 our service members and veterans where and when they  
14 need it, especially when they are disadvantaged  
15 because of unfair or discriminatory policies. It is  
16 my hope that today's hearing will do exactly that. I  
17 turn it back to Chair Menchaca.

18 CHAIR MENCHACA: Thank you, Chair  
19 Dinowitz, and I want to head over to our Committee  
20 Counsel Harbani Ahuja for some procedural items as we  
21 move forward.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
23 you, Chair. My name is Harbani Ahuja, and I'm  
24 Counsel to the Committee on Immigration for the New  
25 York City Council. Before we begin, I want to remind

2 everyone that you will be on mute until you are  
3 called on to testify, when you will be unmuted by the  
4 host, and I will be calling on panelist to testify.  
5 Please listen for your name to be called. I will be  
6 periodically announcing who the next panelist will  
7 be. For everyone testifying today, please note that  
8 there may be a few seconds of delay before you are  
9 unmuted, and we thank you in advance for your  
10 patience. All hearing participants should submit  
11 written testimony to [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). At  
12 today's hearing, the first panelist to give testimony  
13 will be representatives from the Administration  
14 followed by council member questions, and then  
15 members of the public will testify. Council members  
16 who have questions for a particular panelist should  
17 use the raise hand function in zoom and I will call  
18 on you after that panelist has completed their  
19 testimony. I will now call on members from the  
20 Administration to testify. Testimony will be  
21 provided by Amauri Espinal, Assistant Commissioner of  
22 Community Affairs at DVS. Additionally, the  
23 following representative will be available for  
24 answering questions, Tom Tortorici, Director of Legal  
25 Initiative at MOIA. Before we begin, I will be

2 administering the oath. Assistant Commissioner  
3 Espinal, Director Tortorici, I will call on you each  
4 individually for a response. Please raise your right  
5 hands. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole  
6 truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony  
7 before this committee and to respond honestly to  
8 council member questions? Assistant Commissioner  
9 Espinal?

10 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL: I  
11 do.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
13 you. Director Tortorici?

14 DIRECTOR TOM TORTORICI: I do.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
16 you. Assistant Commissioner, you may begin your  
17 testimony when you are ready.

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
19 Thank you. Good morning, Chair Dinowitz, committee  
20 members, and advocate. My name is Amauri Espinal and  
21 I'm proud to serve as the Assistant Commissioner of  
22 Community Affairs for the New York City Department of  
23 Veteran Services. I am joined today by Tom  
24 Tortorici, Director of Legal Initiatives from the  
25 Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. I welcome this

2 opportunity testify about city services for foreign-  
3 born and veteran families. Immigrants have long  
4 enlisted in all branches of the U.S. Military  
5 beginning with the Revolutionary War. The foreign-  
6 born represented half of all military recruits by the  
7 1840s, and 20 percent of the 1.5 million service  
8 members in the Union Army during the Civil War.  
9 Today, the number of veterans who were born outside  
10 the United States stands at approximately 530,000  
11 representing three percent of all 18.6 million  
12 veterans nationwide. During times of peace, non-  
13 citizen members of the Armed Forces may obtain  
14 citizenship after one year of military service.  
15 Section 329 of the Immigration and Nationality Act  
16 authorizes the President to issue executive order,  
17 specifying periods of conflict during which foreign-  
18 born members of the U.S. Military are immediately  
19 eligible for U.S. citizenship. Many non-citizens  
20 have used the military as an avenue to obtain  
21 expedited citizenship, encouraging non-citizen to  
22 enter the military by offering them expedited  
23 citizenship, gives the military access through a  
24 broader pool of talented service members. With the  
25 cost of becoming a U.S. citizen rising, as fees

2 increased by 83 percent in 2020, naturalization via  
3 military service provides an alternate path to  
4 citizenship for non-citizens while the military  
5 benefits from a range of skills that non-citizens  
6 bring. Under the Trump Administration, the  
7 Department of Homeland Security and the Department of  
8 Defense implemented a series of new policies that  
9 have created barriers for non-citizen to gain  
10 citizenship via military service. In 2017, these new  
11 policies required the DOD to add more background  
12 checks for non-citizens and implemented mandatory  
13 wait times before the DOD could issue honorable  
14 service paperwork that non-citizens must have in  
15 order to apply for citizenship. These regulations led  
16 to the number of citizenship applications to drop to  
17 1,069 for the first quarter of 2018, down from 3,132  
18 in the last quarter of 2017. Although this policy  
19 was ultimately ruled illegal in 2020, it still had  
20 tremendous effects on the service members and  
21 families who had hopes of accessing the wide array of  
22 benefits a U.S. citizenship offers. As a result of  
23 the Trump Administration policy, non-citizen service  
24 members have been denied their rights and privileges  
25 that accompanies citizenship including their right to

2 vote, their right to sponsor non-citizen family  
3 members, and the rights to travel with a passport.  
4 They also face high risks overseas due to, for  
5 instance, lack of access to consular services and  
6 protection typically available to citizen  
7 counterparts. For these reasons, foreign-born  
8 veterans across the country face challenges  
9 including, but not limited to employment difficulty,  
10 housing and security, low educational attainment, and  
11 cultural isolation. Throughout the city, there is a  
12 wide range of services to the foreign-born veteran  
13 community, and an even more significant number of  
14 them to all foreign-born New Yorkers. Although our  
15 veteran citizenship status can effect their  
16 opportunities when attempting to connect with  
17 resources, DVS will still engage with and inform any  
18 veterans, regardless of their citizenship status, of  
19 benefits they may qualify for. For example, if a  
20 veteran discloses to DVS that they are illegal  
21 permanent resident seeking employment assistance and  
22 housing placement, DVS will engage with the veteran  
23 and inform them of their eligibility for employment  
24 opportunities with veteran preference regardless of  
25 citizenship status. While employment is one such

2 example, DVS stands ready to provide all foreign-born  
3 veterans with information about a variety of benefits  
4 and services they are entitled to and will support a  
5 veteran in obtaining the legal services necessary to  
6 securing naturalization if requested. My colleagues  
7 at MOIA also play a role in connecting immigrant  
8 veterans to the services they need through their Ask  
9 MOIA hotline. MOIA serves as a referral point for  
10 all immigrant New Yorkers including immigrant  
11 veterans in connecting with the services and help  
12 that they need. This includes immigration help. The  
13 city has invested tens of millions of dollars in  
14 immigration legal services and the providers that  
15 MOIA contracts with through its Action NYC program  
16 are capable of serving a wide range of clients  
17 including immigrant veterans and their families. We  
18 thank you for the opportunity to testify in this  
19 matter and look forward to any questions you or other  
20 committee members may have.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
22 you so much for your testimony. I'd like to now turn  
23 it to questions from Chair Menchaca followed by Chair  
24 Dinowitz. Panelist, if you could stay unmuted for  
25 this question and answer, if possible, that would be

2 appreciated. Thank you, and I'll turn it over to  
3 Chair Menchaca.

4 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Yeah, thank you,  
5 thank you Harbani, and I, I want to start off with  
6 some questions that I don't know if MOIA will have  
7 these, and in your testimony, you speak to this  
8 larger population of immigrant veterans. Do we know  
9 how many of them are residing in the city of New  
10 York, like as New Yorkers, that fall under the  
11 category of immigrant veterans?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
13 So, currently we do have some data on that, Chair  
14 Menchaca, and about 5,400 are non-citizens in New  
15 York City who are either active duty now, in the  
16 past, or in the Reserves or National Guard.

17 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, and I'm  
18 very curious about your data collection and  
19 specifically about immigration status of veterans.  
20 Is that something that is actively sought for and  
21 intake forms in any way or demographics that are  
22 provided or are part of surveys when you do intake?  
23 Is that something that you collect?

24 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
25 So, through our connect platform, we do ask the

2 question of immigration status, so specifically with  
3 lawful permanent resident status, it is asked,  
4 although we don't have a high volume of veterans that  
5 do report being on the status.

6 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Can you repeat  
7 that last part?

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
9 So, although we do, we do ask the question of lawful  
10 permanent resident status, it's a low volume that are  
11 received for assistance requests for that need.

12 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, I want to  
13 come back to that in my second round. I'm just kind  
14 of intaking and really trying to get a sense of the  
15 population itself and how we're engaging. How are we  
16 coordinating an interagency effort to improve on  
17 data, data collection about needs of these service  
18 members? These service members are probably  
19 engaging in other agencies as well, and so how are we  
20 really pulling all that data together to understand  
21 the better snap shot of need?

22 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
23 So, I appreciate that question again, Chair, with the  
24 Executive order 65, which has different city agencies  
25 collecting information on the veteran indicator

2 question, we are making strides in collecting data  
3 from all of our agencies to reflect their specific  
4 services. I then, with that veteran status of the  
5 veteran themselves or their family members and we're  
6 happy to say that we have made some strides with  
7 that, and we're looking to having everyone, you know,  
8 complete their, their operational changes to make  
9 that (inaudible).

10 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Can you give me  
11 an example of one of the strides that you're talking  
12 about?

13 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
14 So, for instance, you know, basically with, with  
15 having the question of have you or anyone in your  
16 household ever served in the military including the  
17 National Guard or Reserve, we can better refer that  
18 individual or family to appropriate services. There  
19 are special services that exist for those who have  
20 served in the military as well as their family  
21 members, so it would better streamline that  
22 individual of that family being connected to the  
23 appropriate referrals.

24 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, and one  
25 service in particular that's really important,

2 especially to this city council that has put so much  
3 money in something like CUNY Citizenship Now, we have  
4 really double downed our efforts in ensuring that if  
5 anyone needs a lawyer, veterans or non-veterans,  
6 needs a lawyer to help them through the process,  
7 getting a green card and becoming a, a citizen, how  
8 are you connecting anyone comes to you who presents  
9 as, as a veteran or a family member of a veteran and  
10 connects them to; how are you connecting them to  
11 citizen process services?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

13 That's a great question, councilman. So, our Vet  
14 Connect NYC platform, we have an intake process that  
15 we gather as much demographic information as we from  
16 that individual and then we have a number of  
17 different legal service provider within the platform  
18 that specifically deal with immigration law. They  
19 are experienced and have culture competency as well  
20 in addition to providing the services in a number of  
21 different languages. So, we again, we try to make  
22 that, that distinction as far as, you know, what  
23 language or what that specific need is for that  
24 client to make that (inaudible) ultimately with the  
25 outcome of obtaining that citizenship status.

2 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: And how many have  
3 you walked through the process of full citizenship or  
4 is there a number that tells us the city has walked,  
5 you know, X-amount of service members that's through  
6 citizenship process? How many?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
8 So, the current breakdown for the year 2021 shows  
9 that we had four assistance requests for immigration  
10 law.

11 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Say that again,  
12 how many?

13 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
14 Four.

15 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Four requests  
16 from all of your engagement throughout your agency  
17 interactions. Is that right? Four?

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
19 For the year of 2021, yes, councilman.

20 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: 2021. Is there a  
21 sense of, over time, since you started collecting  
22 data, how many have gone through?

23 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
24 So, if we did a scrub of 2017 to present and the  
25 number was under 10.

2 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay. I'm going  
3 to come back-to-back again later, and I'm curious  
4 about who you're referring them to. So, it sounds  
5 like there's four, and potentially under 10 since  
6 2017, you said?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
8 2017, yes.

9 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Who are, who are  
10 referring these New Yorkers to?

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
12 Again, we have a number of different providers within  
13 the platform. Some of them include Legal Services  
14 NYC, New York Legal Assistance Group, Urban Justice  
15 Center, Sunnyside Community Services, and then Center  
16 for Immigration and Advancement of New Americans,  
17 Inc., and of course, you know, we also, you know, if  
18 we have something that a provider may not be able to  
19 handle, you know, we connect with MOIA through their,  
20 you know, Action NYC line, and then, you know, try  
21 to, again, really narrow it down to the needs of that  
22 client to get them the best results possible.

23 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: And I'm just  
24 trying to pull all these numbers together in real  
25 time in my head, and I'm thinking, you said about

2 there's over 5,000 New Yorkers who have presented to  
3 you as having some kind of immigrant experience and  
4 you are only clocking in under 10 in the last, 2017.  
5 What does that say about the relationship that the  
6 Veteran's Department has, and the city has with our  
7 veterans, especially those who are, have some kind of  
8 immigrant experience?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

10 Yeah, I mean, certainly from those numbers  
11 councilman, it seems that, you know, there may be,  
12 you know, lack of awareness, the services that are  
13 provided by DVS. So, you know, we've made an effort  
14 to, you know, conduct outreach, specifically with the  
15 New York City veteran community, military and veteran  
16 community survey which we sent out this year. We're  
17 trying to better access the needs of the community  
18 and really, you know, hope to get those trend  
19 analyses to better the community and really look at  
20 what the needs are.

21 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: I'm going to ask  
22 one last question, and then I'm going to hand it over  
23 to my co-chair for questions, and then I'll come back  
24 for some deeper dives. Do we know, do you know, if

2 immigrant veterans are eligible for VA benefits so  
3 that they can receive them?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

5 Yes. So, they are eligible for VA benefits. In  
6 general, citizen status does not affect that. They  
7 are still eligible mostly based off their discharge  
8 characterization. So, yes, the VA benefits are not  
9 affected by citizenship status.

10 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, so they are  
11 eligible to receive those benefits. Okay, I'm going  
12 to pause here, and hand it over to my co-chair  
13 Dinowitz.

14 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

15 Thank you.

16 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Thank you, co-  
17 chair. I want to pick up on some of the items that  
18 Chair Menchaca spoke about, starting with the last  
19 one, about VA benefits. It's based off of discharge  
20 characterization, so if you were discharged  
21 honorably, you're entitled to those benefits. Do you  
22 see, in the information and data you have, do you see  
23 a discrepancy between citizen discharge status and  
24 non-citizen discharge status?

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

3 Excellent question, Chair, there's no discrepancy.

4 I'd say one of the only drawbacks that someone who is  
5 a non-citizen would face would be potentially if they  
6 are outside of the continental United States. They  
7 may not have VA services or VA facilities near by or  
8 readily available, you know, to obtain the services  
9 that someone in the United States would have  
10 available to them. So, in other words, you know,  
11 physical location may impact the delivery of  
12 services.

13 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay, but based on  
14 the information you have, you don't see someone's  
15 immigration status as impacting how they were  
16 discharged from the military?

17 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

18 No, no. It doesn't have any impact on that.

19 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay, well, that's  
20 good to hear. I want to go back to, again, some of  
21 the things that Chair Menchaca touched on. The legal  
22 services available, I just want to get a little  
23 clarity on this. You said these were available  
24 through MOIA, but very often people dealing with  
25 issues involving, you know, veterans in the armed

2 services may need a different or specialized type of  
3 legal service cause veteran's issues are at times,  
4 complicated. So, are there any legal services, you  
5 mentioned, are there lawyers that specialize in this  
6 type of law, in this type of service?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

8 Yes. Absolutely, councilman, and I don't know, and I  
9 apologize if I mis-spoke earlier, but those providers  
10 that I mentioned are in our Vet Connect NYC platform,  
11 so they are culturally competent when it comes to  
12 immigration and citizenship law as well as military  
13 culture as well. So, they do have that niche  
14 understanding those unique situations.

15 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: I feel like I'm  
16 going backwards unpacking these things, but I want to  
17 talk a little more about Executive Order 65 which you  
18 mentioned.

19 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
20 SURE.

21 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: So, so can you give  
22 me an example if someone enters, I don't know, a  
23 senior center, there's an intact form if they're a  
24 first-time member of that senior center. Is that how  
25 it works?

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

3 So basically, the veteran indicator question allows  
4 other city agencies to ask that individual rather  
5 they or anyone in their household has served in the  
6 military, including the National Guard and Reserve.  
7 So, in that instance, if there is a service that can  
8 be provided based on, let's say, for a senior  
9 veteran, they may be entitled to certain compensation  
10 or pension benefits through the US (crosstalk).

11 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Yeah, so what I'm  
12 asking is for you to paint me a picture. When does  
13 someone fill out this intake form; any time they  
14 interact with a city agency?

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
16 So, it should be any time that they interact, when a  
17 member of the public comes in and fills out an intake  
18 form, coming into a city agency, yes.

19 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: So, if I'm an order  
20 adult, my first time, I'm going to RAIN Senior Center  
21 that's in my district, I fill out an intake form,  
22 right? What if I'm already a member of that center?  
23 Right, if the Executive Order only commenced in March  
24 of this year, if I'm already a member of that center,  
25 then I'm not filling out the form again, right? This

2 isn't a yearly form. This is a one-time thing,  
3 correct?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL: I  
5 can't comment on how the ... (crosstalk).

6 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Just as an example,  
7 just as an example ...

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
9 Right. Right.

10 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: So, have you been  
11 able to work with these agencies because this is an  
12 important question, and kind of the question, you  
13 know, Chair Menchaca was talking about; a problem  
14 that DVS has had is identifying the veterans in the  
15 first place. Right, so I'm just wondering if any  
16 efforts have been made. If it's been thought about  
17 to reach out, not only to people coming in the first  
18 time in this intake form, but for folks who have been  
19 involved with, again, just as an example, our older  
20 adult centers, has there been any discussion about  
21 that?

22 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
23 There's been some communication through the EO65 as  
24 far as going back and looking at previous clients who  
25 have come into the respective centers or their

2 offices, and you know, DVS is always trying to keep  
3 open relationships with our sister city agencies to  
4 see how we can further assist them in gathering that  
5 data. I don't know if my colleague, Tom Tortorici  
6 would like to add on to that.

7 TOM TORTORICI: Sure. For direct city  
8 services, we would assume that any person the agency  
9 interacts with, whether presently or in the past, you  
10 know, in the course of their work, they would pose  
11 this question.

12 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: I'm sorry. Can you  
13 say that again?

14 TOM TORTORICI: Yeah, so for our city  
15 agencies interacting with the public providing direct  
16 services to the public, they would pose this question  
17 of anyone they interact with going forward following  
18 the EO.

19 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Yeah, I guess what  
20 I'm getting at is that I would just encourage;  
21 because it's that key phrase, going forward, and  
22 that's so important, but it's also important to look  
23 back because I think this Executive Order is an  
24 acknowledgement that we have not identified all our  
25 veterans and veteran families and so I would

2 encourage MOIA and DVS to work with the city agencies  
3 to yes, continue to look forward, but also to look  
4 back at folks who are involved in one way or another  
5 with city agencies and city services, but have not  
6 been asked that question because identifying our  
7 veterans, I think, is almost step number one to, you  
8 know, for them accessing help. So, just to be clear  
9 on Executive Order 65, are all city agencies now on  
10 their intake forms asking that question or is that  
11 still sort of a work in progress?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
13 DVS is actively working with those city agencies.  
14 Although not all city agencies have completed the EO.  
15 We are actively working with them to make that  
16 (inaudible).

17 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay. All right,  
18 and when you speak to a; you know, I think one of the  
19 complicating factors, I think, is that, I guess if  
20 it's through Vet Connect, you are asking is their  
21 immigration status ... (crosstalk).

22 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
23 Legal permanent status.

24 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Legal permanent  
25 status, I'm apologize. I will tell you that

2 particularly after the Trump Administration, it's  
3 often been very hard for some of our immigrant  
4 neighbors to say that. A lot of them are very  
5 scared, honestly to say that, and so is there any  
6 sort of personal outreach you're doing, any, not  
7 assuming one way or the other, but when you interact  
8 with a veteran, just informing them of the benefits  
9 and rights that they have regardless of how they  
10 self-identify, is that a practice that you're  
11 engaging in?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

13 Yes, so excellent question again, Chair. It's  
14 obviously, we understand it's difficult for anyone to  
15 divulge their citizenship status, and again, I'll go  
16 back to releasing that veteran and military community  
17 survey, you know, we made it very clear that the  
18 response would be anonymous and kept confidential,  
19 and we're just really trying to dig in deep into the  
20 community to see what their needs are. If someone  
21 does call or submit an assistance request online, the  
22 same confidentiality is assured through us as well as  
23 through our legal providers who will assist them in  
24 the future.

2 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay, and it's, I  
3 know one of my questions is centered on this sort of  
4 communication and trust, but it's, you know, an  
5 incredible thing to serve your country especially if  
6 you're foreign-born, and that there are, I think some  
7 5,400 citizens and was it four or six this year?

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
9 It was four this year.

10 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Four this year have  
11 availed themselves of the robust services that our  
12 city provides in acquiring citizenship. I think it  
13 speaks to the need to continuing to build that trust  
14 and build that communication of what DVS provides. I  
15 want to acknowledge the presence of Council Member  
16 Eugene. Council Member Eugene has joined us. I'll  
17 give it back to Chair Menchaca for now for some  
18 follow up.

19 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Yeah, thank you,  
20 and before I do some follow up, are there any  
21 members, and I'll hand it over to Harbani to see if  
22 there are any other members who have questions from  
23 the committee.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
25 you, Chair. I see that Council Member Chin has her

2 hand raise. As a reminder, if there are any other  
3 council members that have questions, please use the  
4 Zoom raise hand function, and we'll call in you in  
5 the order in which you have raised your hand. I'll  
6 turn it to Council Member Chin for questions.

7 SGT. BIONDO: Starting time.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: Thank you.  
9 Thank you to the Co-Chair for this hearing.  
10 Assistant Commissioner, you know, city council, we  
11 pushed to set up the Department of Veteran Affairs in  
12 New York City because we see how important it is that  
13 (inaudible) and make sure they know what their rights  
14 are. So, my question is that, you know, the number  
15 they give you of this year is only four. So,  
16 relating outreach, like how are we letting the  
17 veterans, and especially the immigrant community know  
18 about services that are available to the people who  
19 have served this country. So, it comes back to the  
20 question I raise constantly is that how are we  
21 utilizing local media, local organization, ethnic  
22 media; I mean, those are the resources that are  
23 available to us and to let the larger community know  
24 that it's available, and then they can inform their

2 family members or their relative. So, is your  
3 department utilizing that resource?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL: I  
5 appreciate the question, Council Member Chin, and  
6 yes. So, DVS, you know, obviously through the  
7 pandemic, we had to shift more to digital outreach,  
8 but we do express our services during our veteran's  
9 advisory board meeting that happen on a quarterly  
10 basis. You know, we do have meeting with various  
11 community boards throughout the city. We do  
12 communicate all of our services including legal  
13 services throughout our weekly DVS newsletter. We  
14 collaborate with CUNY, veterans on campus and hold  
15 various meetings with them, and again, I'll go back  
16 to the community survey which we're really trying to  
17 get that information directly from our constituents  
18 and are really trying to figure out what their needs  
19 are and if there are existing needs to, you know,  
20 further expand on our legal immigration services.  
21 So, we're doing, you know, outreach within various  
22 tools; we're on social media and Facebook and  
23 Instagram, Twitter, and you know ... (crosstalk).

24 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: But are  
25 you, are you (inaudible). Are you (inaudible)?

2 What's that noise? Okay. What I'm also talking  
3 about is the local, ethnic media. Like do you  
4 publicize your resources in those newspapers. It's a  
5 lot of the immigrants, you know, their family member,  
6 they still rely on these local ethnic newspapers and  
7 radio stations. You know, do you get yourself  
8 invited to some of their TV stations to really talk  
9 about services that are available to our veterans?  
10 That's what I'm saying, like these resources are  
11 available and we need to utilize them and I know that  
12 the mayor had an Executive Order asking every city  
13 agency to put a certain amount of budget to advertise  
14 in ethnic local media so are you also doing that  
15 cause that is such a great resource to at least get  
16 the information out to the larger immigrant  
17 community?

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

19 Yeah, that was an excellent question again. So, we  
20 are, again councilwoman, we're in the local  
21 communities, you know, we'd be willing to get support  
22 from the council on these ethnic media sources. As  
23 always, we're trying to improve our reach throughout  
24 the community. I'm more than willing to, you know,

2 receive any support from the council on being  
3 connected to those ... (crosstalk).

4 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: But that's  
5 what's (inaudible).

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
7 Thank you. Yeah ... (crosstalk).

8 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: That's at  
9 the mayor's office, MOIA, right?

10 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
11 Yes.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: As far as  
13 like interagency working together and they have the  
14 resources, right? So ... (crosstalk).

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
16 Absolutely.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: Yeah. I  
18 mean, that's what I'm talking about.

19 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
20 So, just to ... (crosstalk).

21 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: Yeah.

22 TOM TORTORICI: So, just to respond a  
23 bit, and thank you for the opportunity. So, MOIA  
24 conducts outreach to immigrant New Yorkers broadly to  
25 hundreds of thousands of immigrant New Yorkers who

2 seeks services that the city provides, and immigrant  
3 veterans are among that number of small subsets. The  
4 5,400 non-citizen military personnel in New York  
5 City, that number comes from the ACS 2019 data and  
6 includes active duty and veterans. So, it's likely  
7 that the number of immigrant veterans is smaller than  
8 that number. So, through various ... (crosstalk).

9 SGT. BIONDO: Time expired.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: Oh, finish  
11 your answer.

12 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Yes, please  
13 continue.

14 TOM TORTORICI: Sure, our outreach  
15 efforts are broad; however, there are things that we  
16 can do for DVS and their effort to conduct direct  
17 outreach to veterans. For example, the USCIS lists  
18 in country order, the countries from which veterans  
19 naturalizing come, and so we could assist them in  
20 crafting targeted outreach, but the Naturalization  
21 and Immigration Legal Services invested in by the  
22 city at the tune of millions of dollars, tens of  
23 millions of dollars over the course of the past  
24 years, are available to all immigrant New Yorkers,  
25 among them veterans, and we do believe that veterans

2 deserve direct outreach as well as special services  
3 and are here to support that effort however possible.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER MARGARET CHIN: Yeah, I  
5 mean that's MOIA, you have all the media contact, you  
6 know the country, you know which community with the  
7 ethnic media you would reach out to. I just want to  
8 see like a list of, you know, radio program that  
9 you're on and network, you know, the cable TV, the  
10 newspaper that you put stories in, you know, even  
11 just stories about how immigrant veterans got  
12 service, and this is how the community knows about  
13 it, then they can do the referral to their family  
14 members and friends. That's what I'm asking for, you  
15 know, so I hope that we can, you know, really get  
16 that out there so that more people will know about  
17 what's available to help them. Thank you. Thank  
18 you, Co-Chair.

19 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
20 Sure.

21 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you,  
22 Council Member Chin, and I just want to say thank you  
23 Council Member and Chair of the Asian Committee. I'm  
24 reminded of the hearing that you held focused on  
25 senior veterans, and I feel like it's the same

2 conversation we keep having over and over and over  
3 again with the city agencies and especially thinking  
4 about now, MOIA and what they're not doing to really  
5 ensure that all these specific populations that we  
6 have relationships to like veterans through Veterans  
7 Department that yeah, the council created because we  
8 know that kind of engagement is necessary and  
9 important, that this is not happening, that you're  
10 getting, you're getting recommendations from council  
11 members about how to do this, and this is consistent  
12 and it is a small population, but I believe, and I  
13 think this what we're trying to get to the bottom of,  
14 whether the current knowable population is truly the  
15 total population and the (inaudible) is being placed  
16 on the community to connect to city, and this is,  
17 time and time again, every agency that we keep having  
18 conversations around, it's like we're waiting for  
19 community members to join us, when it should be the  
20 other way around, and so Council Member Chin's  
21 comments and recommendations are good, but they come  
22 all the time, and this is how we direct you, and so,  
23 I'm just frustrated right now just listening to this  
24 back and forth in a big way, and so maybe what I can  
25 do is ask MOIA, how are you creating the strategies

2 that are built out of outcomes with the Department of  
3 Veteran Services and do you have; does that exist  
4 right now? Are you really looking at numbers about  
5 whose out there, and how you're moving them through a  
6 legal process for a green card and ultimate  
7 citizenship? Does that exist, and maybe this is to  
8 Tom or anybody else at MOIA whose on the call.

9 TOM TORTORICI: Sure. We believe very  
10 strongly in providing veterans with the services they  
11 need including naturalization services, and we'll  
12 continue to work with DVS in order to ensure that  
13 they do receive them and that they know about them.

14 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, so that's  
15 not what I'm asking. I'm not asking about belief  
16 because you could believe it or not. I'm not  
17 interested on your belief. I'm interested in the  
18 outcomes and the strategies that you have; you're  
19 building in and that you're holding yourself  
20 accountable to. Does that exist?

21 TOM TORTORICI: No. We currently do not  
22 ask our contracted immigration legal service partners  
23 to report veteran's data to use at MOIA. It has not  
24 historically been amongst the data that is reported.  
25 However, as part of a comprehensive legal consult, a

2 provider will collect that information in order to  
3 make an assessment, an evaluation of the eligibility  
4 status of the individual to naturalize or avail  
5 themselves with some other benefit. So, we have not  
6 historically captured that data, therefore, can't  
7 speak to outcomes; however, I have had a number of  
8 conversations anecdotally with partners with respect  
9 to the numbers they see and its similar to what my  
10 colleague at DVS has explained. (Inaudible)  
11 indicated that over the past 20 years, only a small  
12 handful, less than 10 veterans have sought  
13 naturalization through their service. They indicated  
14 that the most military personnel seek naturalization  
15 (inaudible) military while they are serving and so,  
16 so, we will continue to work with DVS and our  
17 partners in order to ensure that veterans  
18 specifically receive outreach and are aware of  
19 services.

20 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, I'm going  
21 to pull pieces of that, and I just want to pause  
22 really quick. Are there any other members that have  
23 questions before I keep going?

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: At this  
25 time, we're not seeing any hands. I will just remind

2 again council members if anyone has questions, please  
3 use the Zoom raise hand function. For now, I'll turn  
4 it back to you, Chair.

5 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you, thank  
6 you Harbani, and okay, let's take the data  
7 collection, so you're not collecting data, so we  
8 don't even know how we're doing at this point. We're  
9 taking veterans into consideration. I understand  
10 that there's a larger push for legal services across.  
11 So, I get the catch all. That's not working clearly,  
12 and so does MOIA have any data through Action NYC as  
13 was mentioned earlier by the Assistant Commissioner  
14 on how many vets and military members have been  
15 served through Action NYC? Now, that's a very  
16 specific Action NYC. There are a lot of other legal  
17 services, but I'm just trying to focus on Action NYC.

18 TOM TORTORICI: No, Chair Menchaca. We  
19 have not gathered that information.

20 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Got it. It's  
21 really nowhere across, across the; now, I think the  
22 other question really is kind of thinking through  
23 what happened if someone made contact as a veteran;  
24 and then I'm kind of shifting over to DVS, and  
25 presented as an LPR, legal permanent resident, and

2 whether not that automatically connects them to legal  
3 services so they can move through the process. Is  
4 that something that's automatic? I just want to get  
5 a since about your relationship as I'm understanding  
6 is we have to wait for them present themselves and  
7 identify themselves as, is there an automatic  
8 connection to legal services for citizenship?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

10 So, should we communicate with any veteran who does  
11 present with that need, council member? We would  
12 again, perform an assessment and refer them to anyone  
13 of the providers within the platform as well as  
14 giving them the toll free number for CIS, you know,  
15 for military service member, you know, to get  
16 extradited citizenship process, you know, with some  
17 of the benefits of shorter residency requirements, no  
18 stated residence, and then the waved application fees  
19 as well. So, they would have the option to either be  
20 referred to the service providers or directly call  
21 CIS and, you know, get the information themselves and  
22 we help them do that on the platform.

23 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, so I get  
24 the process. I guess the question I, because I think  
25 what I'm hearing you say is that if they present with

2 the need. So, not only do they have to say hey, I'm  
3 a legal permanent resident, I'm an LPR, I'm a  
4 veteran, I'm an LPR, but they also have to say to  
5 you, I need some legal services here, so can you help  
6 me walk through the process, and then you do an  
7 assessment. Is that how it works? You have to  
8 present the need?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

10 Yes, councilman. There is a; yes, we have to get a  
11 general sense of what that (inaudible) with whether  
12 it be legal services, employment, housing, etc., we  
13 do have to narrow that down to a specific category.

14 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay, and I guess  
15 the flag here is that someone, it's like all these  
16 barriers that we're trying to identify for your all,  
17 and expose so that we can solve the issue, we want to  
18 do that with you. It's just a lot of passion behind  
19 these. So, thank you for bearing with us here, but  
20 sometimes New Yorkers might not even know that they  
21 are eligible. There's some issues with knowledge.  
22 Maybe it's a family member. The 5,000 veterans have  
23 family members that are eligible. So, this number  
24 explodes, and there might be a need for this that  
25 might not even be fully known, and so there's so much

2 ownness of the New Yorker and I think that's what  
3 we're trying to expose here. Is that understood?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

5 Absolutely, and I'll say, you know, councilman, that  
6 that is a challenge for veterans with respect all  
7 benefits as far as them not knowing that they may  
8 qualify. Some service members aren't even aware that  
9 they qualify as being a veteran because either they  
10 went out in combat zone or didn't serve during a  
11 certain era, so it's a challenge that DVS faces on a  
12 daily basis and you know, we're always striving to  
13 hit each of those touchpoints, you know, and really  
14 educate and information our, our constituency to, you  
15 know, be informed and apply to those benefits even if  
16 they may not be eligible for them (inaudible), but  
17 especially with the Road to Citizenship status, we  
18 definitely make every effort to not only point them  
19 in the right direction, but inform that hey, these  
20 services do exist and we're here to, you know, to  
21 help you with that process.

22 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: And I think ...

23 (crosstalk) larger point is that we're not even doing  
24 that in ethnic media sometimes and there are a lot of  
25 gaps to that outreach and that your original strategy

2 is potentially not enough. It's not adequate, and  
3 so, let's move over to the data collection because I  
4 think this is something that the Committee on  
5 Immigration has been thinking a lot about, and we've  
6 passed some bills in the last eight years protecting  
7 data collection and so, especially when looking at  
8 immigration status. Can you clarify; and this is  
9 maybe from MOIA or for DVS, can you clarify how this  
10 practice of collecting data interacts with Local Law  
11 247 of 2017 which regulates the collection and the  
12 retention and the disclosure of personal identifying  
13 information including immigration status?

14 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

15 So, I guess I'll begin and then turn it over to Tom,  
16 but councilman, again, we have a certain number of  
17 questions that we ask, and then other questions may  
18 be asked based off that algorithm. Again, we  
19 guarantee confidentiality and that's disclosed during  
20 our conversation with our staff as well as any of the  
21 providers which we make referrals to. Tom, I don't  
22 know if you want to expand on what MOIA practices.

23 TOM TORTORICI: All personally

24 identifying information collected by our immigration  
25 legal service contracted partners is protected and

2 confidential and MOIA does not have access to that  
3 individual data. The reporting to us comes in  
4 aggregate as mandated by the various laws controlling  
5 privacy and we don't see it or we can't access it  
6 even if we wanted to. On top of that, it's protected  
7 by attorney-client confidentiality and all the  
8 various privileges and so, that information is well-  
9 protected.

10 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: And that's just  
11 in your contracts, so that's legal services contracts  
12 through this Vet Connect, and I just got online and I  
13 looked at the Vet Connect portal. Is that something  
14 that falls under the local law?

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
16 Yes, council member, so Vet Connect is a platform  
17 that is contracted out by DVS and so they offer, you  
18 know, all of those confidentiality that comes along  
19 with case management referrals etc., so yes, they are  
20 contracted by us and fall under those regulations.

21 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Okay. I think  
22 there's a discrepancy then. If Local Law 247  
23 dictates the collection of data, I think there might  
24 be some issues there, and I don't know if MOIA is  
25 picking that up right in terms of how we're asking

2 veterans for legal status, and at what point that  
3 happens and gets collected and then something happens  
4 on the legal services side, so I just want to flag  
5 that as something that's real, especially since there  
6 are many mixed status families that have a potential  
7 LPR and then a, and undocumented family members, and  
8 so these are all part of the Local Law. What we're  
9 trying to do is protect, which makes it difficult,  
10 right, so if we can't ask people their immigration  
11 status, how do we know how to engage, and what does  
12 that engagement look like, and I think this is all  
13 about; this is something that Chair Dinowitz  
14 mentioned many times about trust and relationship.  
15 What is our relationship to our veterans and our  
16 city, and I think we're trying to expose these weak  
17 components of our current strategy and outcomes.  
18 Tom, did you have a point or a question?

19 TOM TORTORICI: No, thank you.

20 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: So, I'm going to  
21 come back to that after the hearing. I want to pause  
22 here really quick before I keep going on questions  
23 and Chair Dinowitz, I don't know if you have any  
24 follow ups.

2 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Yeah, just a few  
3 follow ups. I mean, I think the way Chair Menchaca  
4 that you articulated it was very appropriate trying  
5 to break down the barriers, and I think Council  
6 Member Chin gave one great example of ethnic media.  
7 I don't know about anyone here, but I've seen lots of  
8 advertisements on TV, on Hulu regarding vaccinations.  
9 I mean, the city does this. The city does  
10 advertisement on TV for vaccination, for information  
11 about schools. So, this is something that the city  
12 has experience with. I used to question, have you  
13 considered taking out advertisements on Hulu, on  
14 Youtube, on Facebook to inform the public of these  
15 services, of the great services that you clearly  
16 provide to help break down those barriers?

17 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
18 Sure, that's an excellent point, Chair, and you know,  
19 we can certainly discuss that internally and with our  
20 communications team here to further expand our  
21 outreach and really pinpoint those in each community.  
22 So, we're always willing to expand our reach. Tom, I  
23 don't know if you'd like to answer that as well?

24 TOM TORTORICI: Only that we look forward  
25 to supporting you and providing not only guidance and

2 information, but relationships and various other, you  
3 know, supports to make sure that that happens. We  
4 really strongly (inaudible).

5 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay, so I mean  
6 it's; all right, it's not happening. You know, we  
7 have, and again, just as I feel as though I am kind  
8 of copying Chair Menchaca which is okay, a smart guy,  
9 it's a little, you know, we're here to help, were  
10 here to work together, but it's also a little weird  
11 that, kind of we're the ones providing, you know,  
12 this information. You know, we have thousands and  
13 thousands and thousands of New Yorkers are going to  
14 get vaccinated, and there's questions that the New  
15 York City form asks. Is veteran status one of those  
16 questions?

17 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
18 I'm sorry, councilman, you're saying in a particular  
19 form if that's the question that's asked?

20 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Well, New York City  
21 has a; and correct me if I'm wrong, but New York City  
22 has a form that's filled out and asks you things like  
23 your name, date of birth, you know, have you had XYZ?  
24 Do you identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Latina.  
25 What sex were you assigned at birth? How do you

2 identify your gender? It asks about disabilities.  
3 Have you worked with the health department, I guess  
4 to add that, that veteran question. There's a lot of  
5 people getting vaccinated. It will be a great, it  
6 would have been, I guess, a great opportunity to get  
7 that information that you so desperately need.

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

9 Sure. Excellent question, Chair. So, we have  
10 partnered with PEU to ask that question, again, have  
11 you or anyone in your household ever served in the  
12 military including the National Guard, Reserve ...  
13 (crosstalk).

14 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: I'm sorry, I just  
15 missed you, you partnered with who?

16 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

17 With PEU, Public Engagement Unit from the mayor's  
18 office, so we coordinated with them to add that  
19 question for individuals who are seeking health  
20 insurance coverage, and so we're getting information  
21 from the Public Engagement Unit and then referring  
22 them if they do qualify, and are willing to receive  
23 health coverage at the VA, connect them there, and if  
24 they're otherwise not eligible for VA services, to

2 connect them otherwise to other healthcare coverage  
3 services.

4 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: (Inaudible), but  
5 I'm asking, you know, about the vaccination form  
6 itself. There are questions ...

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL: ...  
8 sure ...

9 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: ... that are asked?  
10 But I am not someone, you know, I have health  
11 insurance through my job, but I, you know, got a New  
12 York City vaccine, so I'm one of those people who,  
13 I'm not a veteran, but as someone like me who may be  
14 a veteran is someone who would, you know, interact  
15 with the city agency in one way, but another way, and  
16 I think the point is, I guess the vaccination form is  
17 not under Executive Order 65, but I guess, what I'm  
18 asking is can it be as more and more people are  
19 getting vaccinated, especially now as the mandates  
20 are being implemented, and as people are getting  
21 booster shots? I think this is an incredible  
22 opportunity to get that information that is so  
23 desperately needed, who is a veteran?

24 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
25 That's an excellent council member. It's something

2 that we'll definitely, you know, want to explore and  
3 see if, you know, we can rate that a reality.

4 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: And I would highly  
5 recommend making it a priority because people are,  
6 you know, the mandate for city workers has just  
7 begun. At some point, we may have a mandate for  
8 students whose families may have served in the  
9 military and I think, as people, by the way, everyone  
10 should get vaccinated, but as New York City is taking  
11 in more of this information, this is an incredible  
12 opportunity to do exactly what I think DVS wants.  
13 The purpose of the Executive Order 65 is, this is an  
14 incredible opportunity. It's a form that people are  
15 filling out, and just ask that one question, would  
16 give us a lot of information and then allow us in  
17 your conversations to ask about, you know, if you  
18 need help with immigration services. My other  
19 question is sort of your, I mean, this comes up all  
20 the time, but your relationship with the Federal  
21 Government and the Federal Veterans Affairs. What  
22 coordination is there specifically as these, I guess,  
23 these centers are closing to help immigrant veterans,  
24 what interactions do you have with the Federal  
25 Government, you know, among other things besides

2 identifying the veterans to let them know that DVS,  
3 New York City is a safe place and a home for our  
4 foreign-born veterans and that we can help them. We  
5 can help them navigate the complex system?

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:

7 Sure. So, I know that DVS has had a couple of  
8 conversation with CNIS to let them know that, you  
9 know, (inaudible) that we are serving as veterans,  
10 and you know, to let them know that we're always  
11 willing to make referrals their way as well as having  
12 them keep us updated on any updated laws or policies  
13 that may affect an individual's getting their status.  
14 You know as well as working with MOIA as a main city  
15 agency that deals with immigration, we also get a  
16 strong base and as Council Member Menchaca mentioned,  
17 we don't know what we don't know. So, we're always  
18 trying to get that information, building those  
19 relationships, and it takes time, but we feel that  
20 we're trying to make strides in getting to a place  
21 where the veteran community would have that trust  
22 (inaudible) their citizenship status once we get in  
23 that path towards that goal.

24 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: I guess my next  
25 question is for MOIA. A few months ago, I think, if

2 any of the other council members can help me out on  
3 the details, but we passed a charter revision to  
4 establish an Office of Ethnic Media which would spend  
5 half of their outreach efforts on, outreach funds on,  
6 you know, specific target groups, ethnic groups,  
7 specific geographic locations. Is that established  
8 under MOIA? Is it another agency in city government?  
9 Has there been any talk among your agencies about  
10 this bill that was enacted, I think it was May, but  
11 has there been any discussion about that?

12 TOM TORTORICI: Not involving me so far;  
13 however, I will get back with my colleagues and  
14 return to the conversation.

15 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay.

16 TOM TORTORICI: I'll follow up after the  
17 hearing.

18 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Thank you, thank  
19 you, (inaudible) you haven't heard anything about  
20 this?

21 MALE VOICE: I have not councilman. I  
22 can certainly again, do some research, get with my  
23 colleagues, and have a response for you at a later  
24 time.

2 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Okay, thank you,  
3 thank you very much. I'll turn it back to Chair  
4 Menchaca.

5 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Yep, thank you,  
6 thank you, Chair Dinowitz, and I think what I'd like  
7 to do. I think we've kind of uncovered a lot of weak  
8 links between the, not just MOIA as the kind of  
9 driving force of immigrants across every city agency,  
10 but even how we're connecting to immigrants in the  
11 veteran's world. We have a great panel, and I want  
12 to ask that we keep MOIA and DVS on, and is that  
13 something that you can do. I know that your  
14 Commissioners are not here and we haven't mentioned  
15 that, but it's always a disappointment when the  
16 Commissioners who are at the helm of these agencies  
17 are not here to listen to public and to members of  
18 the councils, that clearly have great ideas about how  
19 you can do things better, and so that's always a  
20 disappointment, but it's really great that you're  
21 here engaging with us. Can you stay and listen to  
22 the panels that we've constructed throughout the rest  
23 of the time? Is that ... (crosstalk).

24 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
25 Absolutely, yes. I can do that.

2 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Beautiful. We're  
3 going to hear from some really great folks that I  
4 think can offer not only their own ideas through  
5 testimony, but potentially some new strategies that  
6 we can employ together, and especially if you need  
7 more resources to get these things done, and that's  
8 where the council comes. We have the power of the  
9 budget and that's why it's important for you all to  
10 engage with us. So, let's do that. Let's get our  
11 next panel up and going. I know we are joined by  
12 Assembly Member Catalina Cruz who is no stranger to  
13 the city council, was the backbone of so much of what  
14 we did here at the city council on Immigration  
15 Committee and supporting the speaker, so we're just  
16 really happy to have her and others join us. So,  
17 I'll hand it over back to Committee Counsel, and then  
18 periodically throughout the hearing, I will ensure  
19 that we recognized DVS Assistant Commissioner Espinal  
20 and Tom over at MOIA. Thank you for keeping your  
21 cameras and being engaged.

22 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
23 Thank you council member.

24 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
3 you, Chairs. At this time, we've concluded  
4 Administration testimony and I do thank this panel  
5 for their testimony, and will now be moving onto  
6 public testimony. I'd like to remind everyone that  
7 we will be calling on individuals one by one to  
8 testify and each panelist will be given three minutes  
9 to speak. For panelist, after I call your name, a  
10 member of our staff will unmute you. There may be a  
11 few seconds of delay before you are unmuted and we  
12 thank you in advance for your patience. Please wait  
13 a brief moment for the Sergeant at Arms to announce  
14 that you may begin before starting your testimony.  
15 Council members who have questions for a particular  
16 panelist should use their raise hand function in Zoom  
17 and I will call on you after the panel has completed  
18 their testimony in the order in which you have raised  
19 your hands. I would like to now welcome our first  
20 panel to testify. In order, I'll be calling on  
21 retired Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Stock followed by  
22 Assembly Member Catalina Cruz, followed Yesenia Mata,  
23 followed Coco Culhane, followed Cesar Vargas.  
24 Margaret Stock, you may begin your testimony when you  
25 are ready.

2 SGT. AT ARMS: Time starts now.

3 MARGARET STOCK: Thank you. I'm in an  
4 airport, so I apologize for the mask wearing, but I'm  
5 complying with the Federal mandate, and trying to  
6 stay healthy.

7 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: (Crosstalk)  
8 thank you, Margaret.

9 MARGARET STOCK: So, anyway, I'm retired  
10 Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Stock. I'm a Military  
11 Police Officer in the Army Reserve and I was  
12 fortunate enough in 2009 to spearhead an immigrant  
13 recruiting program centered in New York City. It was  
14 called the Military Accessions Vital to the National  
15 Interest Program and the Army chose New York City to  
16 start this recruiting program because New York City  
17 has an incredibly diverse population with highly  
18 educated immigrants who were very eager to join the  
19 United States Army. In fact, they were so eager that  
20 they were often camping out at Fort Hamilton quite  
21 anxious to earn their citizenship through military  
22 service. Unfortunately, that great success story  
23 became a negative story approximately four or five  
24 years ago when the Trump Administration decided that  
25 it no longer wanted to recruit immigrants for the

2 military and it no longer viewed them as an asset,  
3 but rather some kind of national security threat and  
4 also decided to obstruct their pathways to  
5 citizenship, and so today, we're still dealing with  
6 the fall out from that change in policy, and today,  
7 it's actually very, very difficult for many  
8 immigrants joining the military to get their  
9 citizenship, and they're leaving service now often  
10 without their citizenship. I heard a little bit  
11 earlier that you're having a hard time counting these  
12 folks. I will tell you there's a lot of them in the  
13 New York area because they're my clients, and I have  
14 at least more than 10 clients who are immigrant  
15 veterans right now who are not able to get their  
16 citizenship and are fighting with the Department of  
17 Homeland Security and the Department of Defense in  
18 order to try to get their citizenship. It's very  
19 important for many of them to get their citizenship  
20 because they also have family members in the New York  
21 area who are undocumented. I recently, I was able to  
22 get a young man in New York City his citizenship and  
23 he turned around and promptly filed petitions for his  
24 mother and his father. His mother's case was quickly  
25 granted, his father, we're still waiting on, but it's

2 not just one person that's affect when an immigrant  
3 leaves the military. It's the whole family that's  
4 potentially affected, and there are military benefits  
5 programs that impact the families, but in order to  
6 access many of them, the military member or veteran  
7 has to get citizenship first, and that process now is  
8 not as easy as it used to be. It used to be sort of  
9 a success story under the Bush and Obama  
10 Administrations, and then under the Trump  
11 Administration, it turned into a destruction  
12 situation where people were no longer being allowed  
13 to apply for citizenship and their pathways were just  
14 barred and they were viewed as a big security threat.  
15 So, I know I have a limited amount of time to discuss  
16 this, and I'm happy to take your questions, but I do  
17 think that if you're interested in trying to get a  
18 count on the number of immigrants, the best source  
19 would probably to pull immigration lawyers and  
20 immigration service providers in the New York City  
21 area and get them to give you a heads count, because  
22 I don't think you're going to, you're not going to  
23 get it from the Department of Homeland Security.  
24 They don't track people.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time.

2 MARGARET STOCK: So, you're just not  
3 going to get that data from them. It's not going to  
4 be accurate data.

5 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you,  
6 Margaret.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
8 you so much for your testimony. I'd like to now  
9 welcome Assembly Member Catalina Cruz to testify.  
10 You may begin when you are ready.

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

12 ASSEMBLY MEMBER CATALINA CRUZ: Thank  
13 you, Committee Counsel, and I can ... (crosstalk).

14 MALE VOICE: Can I have your attention  
15 ... (crosstalk).

16 ASSEMBLY MEMBER CATALINA CRUZ: My  
17 opportunity to ... (crosstalk).

18 MALE VOICE: (Crosstalk).

19 ASSEMBLY MEMBER CATALINA CRUZ: Sergeant  
20 Perez, we worked together for many, many years, and  
21 the support team is, you always got to give them  
22 props. I am Assembly Member Catalina Cruz. I  
23 represent Jackson Heights, Corona, and Elmhurst, and  
24 like Cesar, who will testify a little while later, I  
25 am also a former Dreamer. I grew up undocumented and

2 the issues of our immigrant community are at the core  
3 of everything I do each and every day. Now, I heard  
4 a little bit of the testimony from earlier and thank  
5 you to, I missed her titles, so I don't want to not  
6 give it to her, but Margaret, thank you for what you  
7 said. You know, I think the fact that our government  
8 is sitting here and saying we can't count folks is a  
9 problem. I ran into the same issue when I was trying  
10 to figure out statewide in order to testify here  
11 today, how many immigrant veterans we have, and I  
12 think it's not just about immigrant veterans because  
13 we are forgetting about the families. The families  
14 of the folks who have given their life, their  
15 sacrifice, their heart, their soul, their everything  
16 for this country. We got to make sure that we're  
17 counting them as well. I have a bill at the State  
18 Legislature that looks to deal with exactly what  
19 Assistant Commissioner Espinal is saying is an issue  
20 which is the outreach, the ability to actually get  
21 this information to folks because if we have programs  
22 at the state level, at the city level, and at the  
23 federal level that could in fact benefit the folks  
24 who have given everything for all of us to be here  
25 today, then we got to do better by them. We are

2 failing our immigrant communities, we are failing our  
3 veteran communities, and we can do better. The  
4 Sergeant Jimenez Act is named after a son of Corona  
5 Queens who passed away after he was captured in the  
6 Iraq war. He was missing for two years and during  
7 those two years, his wife was actually fighting  
8 against her deportation. If it wasn't for a parole  
9 in place that had been put into the books around that  
10 time with the Federal Government, she would have been  
11 deported to the Dominican Republic or she would have  
12 been sent to the Dominican Republic to await her  
13 fate, and there are many, many benefits that are  
14 available to our immigrant veterans, but the fact  
15 that they don't know it exists, that failure is on  
16 us. That failure is on the fact that we don't have a  
17 Commissioner today and I got to tell you, Chairman  
18 Menchaca, the failure results on our own colleagues  
19 who are not here today. I only see two council  
20 members joining. I heard there was one earlier, but  
21 the fact that there aren't more, that tells us a lot  
22 about the respect that our immigrant veterans and  
23 their families are getting from folk. I expect better  
24 from our city colleagues. I expect better from my  
25 state colleagues, and I hope that we actually pass

2 this Bill unanimously with full partisan support in  
3 the State Assembly, and I hope that we get to pass it  
4 unanimously in the Senate next year, and what it will  
5 do is create a division within the Office of Veteran  
6 Affairs that will be completely dedicated to do an  
7 outreach to immigrant communities, the veteran  
8 immigrant communities to let them know about the  
9 resources; everything from how to apply for  
10 citizenship because as we heard from Margaret, it has  
11 become extremely difficult to how to help their own  
12 families if they're going through immigration issues,  
13 how to get a lawyer to defend deportation, all of  
14 those things that if their hard enough for an  
15 immigrant, can you imagine for a veteran whose  
16 spending half their life in another place fighting  
17 our country to make sure we have the rights that we  
18 get to have today, and we can't even do that for  
19 them? We got to do better, and so my call is for our  
20 city council to do the same. Perhaps we should be  
21 creating the same program, a program, or, or at least  
22 dedicate a staffer or two to do the outreach to  
23 immigrant veterans. We got to do better by them.  
24 You know, Cesar, who will testify later, and I don't  
25 want to steal his piece of it, but he and I have had

2 numerous conversations about how difficult it was for  
3 him to become a citizen. If you want to give your  
4 life, your time, your dedication to this country, why  
5 are we not repaying that sacrifice, not only of the  
6 veteran, but of their family with that same respect,  
7 the same level of commitment, and so, we got to do  
8 better. I'm sorry, Assistant Commissioner, but the  
9 fact that we can show up here with no data, the fact  
10 that we can show up here, no offense to you because  
11 I've been a staffer too, but to have the actual  
12 Commissioners here today, tells us a lot about the  
13 place in the food line, if you will, or in the  
14 pyramid of power that our immigrant veterans have,  
15 and we have to do better by them. Thank you for  
16 inviting me. I look forward to working with all of  
17 your to do better by our veteran immigrants. We  
18 can't on the one hand tell them to do more for our  
19 country, and when they actually do, this is what we  
20 do to them. Thank you, and I look forward to working  
21 with you all.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
23 you so much for your testimony. I'd like to now  
24 welcome Yesenia Mata to testify. You may begin when  
25 you are ready.

2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

3 YESENIA MATA: Good morning Chairs

4 Menchaca and Dinowitz. My name is Yesenia Mata. I  
5 am the Executive Director of La Colmena, Immigrant  
6 Rights Organization that supports day laborers and  
7 domestic workers. I am also a Military Police  
8 Specialist in the United States Army Reserve. Thank  
9 you, Chairs Menchaca and Dinowitz for holding this  
10 critical hearing on this issue that often is  
11 forgotten in the broader conversation of military  
12 service. I would like to focus my testimony on  
13 immigrant military families. When a service member  
14 is on duty for their country, it is the entire family  
15 that bears the weight of military service.  
16 Deployments are often felt by the entire family,  
17 mother, spouses, children. When a soldier makes the  
18 ultimate sacrifice, the entire family feels the loss,  
19 and when someone is in a military family, either the  
20 soldier, the sibling, or spouse as an immigrant, the  
21 entire family goes through the insecurity or fear of  
22 possibly deportation or lack of access due to their  
23 immigration status or lack thereof. Across the five  
24 boroughs and through my work, I have been working  
25 with military families, mostly immigrant parents whom

2 have children in the armed forces. They reach out  
3 because they say they don't know where they can turn  
4 to seek help for either legal or mental pressure  
5 within the military service. As some of my fellow  
6 panelist have said, there are legal channels to help  
7 undocumented military parents, and yet, these parents  
8 don't know that, and thus, live in the shadows of  
9 deportation. There's mental services or financial  
10 assistance that military families can tap into, but  
11 they don't see the city as a partner that understands  
12 their military service. There's already a lack of  
13 mistrust in government amongst the immigrant  
14 community in even more in military families. I know  
15 we can do better and I look forward to working with  
16 you council members, the Office of Immigrant Affairs  
17 and Veteran Services to ensure that our immigrant  
18 military service members can know they can turn to  
19 their city for support, and once again, thank you for  
20 holding this important hearing, and thank you as well  
21 to Catalina Cruz for ensuring that we can keep  
22 supporting immigrant families, and thank you Margaret  
23 Stock for continuing being a leader in this movement  
24 an for ensuring that immigrant soldiers are  
25 represented.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
3 you so much for your testimony. I'd like to now  
4 welcome Coco Culhane to testify. You may begin when  
5 you are ready.

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

7 COCO CULHANE: Hi. I'm Coco Culhane, the  
8 founder and Executive Director of Veteran Advocacy  
9 Project or VAP. We provide free legal services to  
10 low income veterans and their families. I just  
11 wanted to talk to the; I wasn't going to testify  
12 cause we don't provide immigration services, but I  
13 realized that we have so many clients over the last  
14 decade who have faced so many challenges. So, I  
15 wanted to just speak to their stories since their not  
16 here to use their voices, and I just wanted to say  
17 that one of the problems we've seen is that, you  
18 know, we would send someone who was a Vietnam veteran  
19 widow and she would go to a legal services provider  
20 and be told, "Well, we don't know military law", so I  
21 think that there is a challenge in terms of just, you  
22 know, basic understanding, and maybe she just got the  
23 wrong attorney that day, but we also have seen  
24 instances where, I remember in the fall of 2018, we  
25 sent a veteran and she was told, "Well this isn't a

2 good time for veterans". I'm not sure why. I think  
3 there's some basic cultural competency maybe that  
4 does need to occur in working between maybe DVS and  
5 MOIA, and when it comes to; I always have to talk  
6 about this, veterans with less than honorable  
7 discharges, they are being left behind. This is a  
8 huge factor. You know, one story we've been working  
9 with the veteran whose dream was to serve in the U.S.  
10 military and he came to the United States when he was  
11 a teenager, he overstayed his visa, he enrolled in  
12 school in the Bronx, and a recruiter came to him and  
13 said, "Don't worry about it, I can get you in", and a  
14 few years into his service, as you know, impeccable  
15 service as a Marine, he discovered those papers were  
16 fake and that this recruiter was being prosecuted  
17 because he had done this with over a dozen  
18 individuals, and his enlistment was fraudulent. This  
19 was announced in front of his entire unit. He was  
20 then hazed for two years. He began drinking. They  
21 offered him a deal if he testified he would get a  
22 general discharge. He could have stayed in the  
23 United States. He could have, you know, kept on  
24 living out his American dream at least, even though  
25 he was losing the dream of being a U.S. Marine.

2 After two years of being kept mostly on restriction  
3 with (inaudible) once every hour, he lose it, and he  
4 shoved a non-commissions officer. He faced Court  
5 Marshall and was given a (inaudible) discharge and  
6 put eventually into removal proceedings, so someone  
7 who basically was, you know, abused by this  
8 recruiter, is now, for the last 10 years, has been  
9 trapped in limbo. We went to counsel to try to help  
10 him, we stayed in his proceedings, but it's looming  
11 over him. He can't get a job because of his  
12 discharge status, his bad conduct discharge status  
13 bars him from healthcare from the VA. He's really  
14 trapped, and there are so many of our clients that  
15 are actually in very similar situations, so we just  
16 hope that the state and the city is doing incredible  
17 work to help these ... (crosstalk).

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time.

19 COCO CULHANE: He don't lose site of them  
20 at all government levels. Thank you.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
22 you so much for your testimony. I'd like to now  
23 welcome Cesar Vargas to testify. You may begin when  
24 you are ready.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

2           CESAR VARGAS: Good morning everyone.

3 Good morning Chairs. Thank you so much for holding

4 such critical hearing that's very important to me.

5 My name is Cesar Vegas. I'm an immigration attorney

6 and Corporal in the United States Army Reserve and

7 also have the honor to work at a city council under

8 Council Member Menchaca, and for me, I think what

9 Council Member Menchaca and Council Member Dinowitz

10 really focused on is really on the story of our

11 immigrant veterans and military families, and I think

12 that is the point of what this hearing is about to

13 really connect with the stories and for vital

14 services, and like many immigrant veterans. I was

15 born in Puebla, Mexico and brought to the U.S. when I

16 was just five years old after my father passed away.

17 Now a widow with a few savings with little to no

18 employment opportunity for her, my mom decided to say

19 good-bye to my grandparents and our place of birth.

20 Like millions of immigrants before us, she wanted to

21 pursue the American dream any way she could, even if

22 it was through a dangerous track through the desert,

23 but with the hopes of one day, maybe one of her sons

24 could become an attorney. Thankfully, we made it

25 across safely. America was not my home. However,

2 growing up without lawful immigration status, closed  
3 many doors for me. Admission to top universities was  
4 out of reach because I didn't have a social security  
5 number. In fact, I was told by a high school  
6 counselor that I couldn't go to college because I was  
7 "illegal". Amidst the denial letters I received from  
8 colleges, the one from West Point hurt particularly  
9 badly because from very early on, I wanted to serve  
10 my country in uniform. After learning of the  
11 contribution of immigrants during the Civil War, and  
12 their service, their proactive service to join the  
13 Union Army because they wanted to also join in the  
14 fight to abolish slavery. That is the commitment of  
15 immigrants in our military, serving their country,  
16 and serving for truly, to benefit the quality and  
17 justice of our nation, but despite those hurdles, I  
18 was not giving up. I graduated from college and law  
19 school at the top of my class. It took a four-year  
20 legal battle, but New York Supreme Court finally  
21 allowed me to practice law in 2015. We won. I  
22 became New York's first undocumented attorney, and a  
23 long lasting 2016, I obtained my green card and  
24 literally enlisted the same day fulfilling my  
25 longstanding commitment to serve my country and to

2 assure that my mother no longer had to fear being  
3 deported because she would now have legal protection  
4 through my military service. It was in basic  
5 training, I saw firsthand the difficult, three-front  
6 war a soldier must fight just to become a citizen.  
7 On the one hand, a broken and complex immigration  
8 system. On the civilian front, a rigid, internal  
9 chain of command on the military front and the lack  
10 of institutional and government support once we get  
11 out. So, for our goal of becoming citizen as they  
12 juggle their military obligations and in the face of  
13 the government's own effort to make the legal process  
14 more difficult as we saw under the Trump  
15 Administration. Others only become citizens after  
16 death. Did you know that one of the first ...  
17 (crosstalk).

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time.

19 CESAR VARGAS: U.S. service members  
20 killed in the Iraq war as undocumented? That's the  
21 story of Marine Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez who was  
22 shot in the chest as his unit took heavy fire in the  
23 Iraq Port of Umm Qasr. He should have been a citizen  
24 the moment he wore his uniform. My mother taught me  
25 the value of service, not simply to our country, but

2 to a commitment that we create a better place, a  
3 better place in our little piece of the world, here  
4 in New York City. Just this February, after years of  
5 delay and background checks, my long journey of 31  
6 years to become and U.S. citizen was finally  
7 completed, and I was able to accomplish this through  
8 the incredible support of incredible people including  
9 Lieutenant Coronel Margaret Stock who helped me along  
10 the process. We always need an advocate on our side,  
11 and Margaret was an advocate, along with Catalina  
12 Cruz, Council Member Menchaca and our entire team. I  
13 have helped about 50 service members including their  
14 loved ones, but I can't do this alone. Here in New  
15 York City, together with the city council, together  
16 with the mayor's office, with MOIA and DVS, we can do  
17 our part to build a coalition of services to ensure  
18 that non-citizen service members as well as their  
19 families can know that their city, that their state,  
20 that their country has their back. So, I look  
21 forward to working with city agencies and with the  
22 city council, and with our partners at every level of  
23 government to ensure that we honor their service  
24 because at the end of the day, this is, it's about  
25 our, it's about veterans using their voice, not just

2 to attack, but to use their training to defend those  
3 values that we all hold dearly. So, thank you for  
4 giving me the opportunity, and I can answer any  
5 questions you may have. Thank you.

6 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you, Cesar.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: Thank  
8 you so much for your testimony. This concludes  
9 testimony for this panel. So, I'm going to turn it  
10 to the council members for questions, starting with  
11 Chair Menchaca.

12 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: A thank you to  
13 this entire panel, and thank you to the active  
14 service members, both Cesar and Yesenia are serving  
15 and if there was anybody else that was serving, I  
16 want to say thank you to you for your service and  
17 your recommendations. I think so much came out of  
18 that work that I think you're seeing being in the  
19 middle of it, and really bringing that to the city  
20 council so that we can inform our agencies and thank  
21 you to the agencies for staying for this panel. I  
22 think my first question, I want to go back to  
23 Margaret who really laid the foundation, I think, for  
24 me, and really understanding how we think about  
25 information and data. You have many cases, I think,

2 that can support kind of a larger vision and the last  
3 thing that you said, and I want to see if there are  
4 any other recommendations that we can all hear about  
5 together, because we will be following up on how we  
6 get better data and information and collect with the  
7 full understanding that we have to keep people safe,  
8 and so how has it worked? Have you seen in work in  
9 other cities where we convene lawyers that are doing  
10 immigration work and seeing if we can get an  
11 anecdotal understanding of what the universe is and  
12 any other ideas that you have, we're all ears.

13 MARGARET STOCK: Well, just the most  
14 obvious example is with deported military veterans  
15 nationwide. The Department of Homeland Security  
16 admitted that it had no idea how many veterans it had  
17 deported cause it wasn't tracking them, and so what  
18 happened was private individuals got together and  
19 started creating a database, and in particular,  
20 there's a veteran, Hector Braze (SP?), whose kind of  
21 famous now nationally who started an Excel  
22 spreadsheet and just started collecting names and  
23 then he started working with the ACLU and the ACLU  
24 now has probably one of the more comprehensive lists  
25 of deported veteran of anybody. In fact, Department

2 of Homeland Security came to the ACLU and said we  
3 can't figure out how many of these people there are,  
4 can you help us? You know, because the government  
5 itself didn't know, and the VA was going to the ACLU  
6 and saying we don't know how many people there are,  
7 can you help us? You know, so I think part of is,  
8 you have to partner with the private entities that  
9 are aware of the existence of veterans. Coco  
10 mentioned she knows about some people, you know,  
11 reaching out to legal service providers, veteran  
12 service providers and asking them to start tabulating  
13 and of course, having somebody responsible for making  
14 the count whose reliable, I think, is key, and it  
15 could be a government entity. You know, Cesar, I  
16 know just got the (inaudible) (background noise) and  
17 I think he's really interested in the issue, so I'm  
18 hoping that perhaps he might be a person that might  
19 willing to take the lead on forming some kind of  
20 coalition that can start getting an accurate count  
21 cause I know it's not seven to ten people, you know,  
22 it's a lot more than that. Myself, I'm an attorney  
23 in Alaska and I have more than 10 clients in New York  
24 City who are military vets, you know, seeking help on  
25 immigration issues, and of course, their family

2 members as well, and a lot of them, as somebody  
3 mentioned earlier, don't know to access the  
4 government for, you know, benefits and things.  
5 They're just not aware of that, and you'd be amazed  
6 at the ignorance out there about veteran's benefits  
7 and whether they're accessible or not.

8 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Well, because I  
9 want to bring in the voice of the Assembly Member who  
10 really kind of is championing the work at the state  
11 level, but before I bring her on, I want to ask you  
12 in terms of this kind of national review, what's the  
13 role of the city and the state, non-federal  
14 government agencies and partners to really kind of  
15 push this forward and just give me the opportunity to  
16 kind of put accountability on us right now as we have  
17 an audience.

18 MARGARET STOCK: Well, I think the big  
19 thing you do is tell the stories that the national  
20 government claims to not know about, and it's really  
21 important in the important in the immigration space  
22 to tell the stories. I mean, Cesar has an incredible  
23 story and when he tell his story, people realize that  
24 the federal government wasn't paying an attention and  
25 they didn't know that this was happening, and they

2 didn't understand what was going on, and you know,  
3 New York City was a tremendous source of recruits  
4 when I was running the (inaudible) program, hundred  
5 and hundreds of extraordinarily, highly qualified  
6 immigrants flowed into the armed forces during that  
7 brief window of time, and they were an incredible  
8 asset to this country, and yet, you don't hear that  
9 at all. All you hear from the federal government is  
10 oh, they're dangerous, you know, they're a national  
11 security threat, you know, and you says, well point  
12 to one of them that's a national security threat and  
13 they can't find one, you know, but telling the  
14 positive stories is really, really important and that  
15 comes from the local level, and then also pressuring  
16 the national government, I mean, you can't fix, New  
17 York City Council can't fix the problems with the  
18 naturalization process, but you can say, hey, we're  
19 sitting here in New York and we're looking at 26  
20 Federal Plaza and I've got a constituent whose been  
21 trying for two and a half years to get citizenship,  
22 and he's Chinese, and he's two blocks away from a big  
23 monument to Chinese Americans who served in the  
24 military, which I'm sure you've all seen. You know,  
25 and it's only a couple of blocks from 26 Federal

2 Plaza and yet, the Feds are preventing this guy from  
3 following in the footsteps of the people that are  
4 honored on that monument because, you know, he's  
5 Chinese and they're afraid of Chinese people these  
6 days, you know, and so telling the local story and  
7 pressuring the national government with your local  
8 stories is a critical part of advocacy and change  
9 cause they seriously don't know what's going on up  
10 there in Washington. I think they are completely out  
11 of touch, and they don't want to hear unless you have  
12 a story that you can illustrate. You know, they just  
13 don't, I mean, they're literally claiming that there  
14 is, you know, because we don't collect data on it, we  
15 don't know how many people there are, you know, and  
16 they don't tell you that that's their own fault cause  
17 they're not collecting the data.

18 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Right, right, and  
19 that's where I want to bring in the Assembly Member  
20 for a minute, and I know she has a busy day, so we're  
21 really, really thankful and it's very key that we  
22 hear from her about her Bill and really making the  
23 connection and I think we are committed at the city  
24 level and I think this is really important that we're  
25 having this conversation at the city level, but the

2 state level in data collection, and I just want to  
3 give her the opportunity right now to connect to  
4 anything that you just said in terms of how New York  
5 City and State can work together on a federal agenda  
6 to change that. Assembly Member Cruz.

7 ASSEMBLY MEMBER CATALINA CRUZ: Unmute  
8 me. Oh, there we go. I was still muted.

9 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Welcome back.

10 ASSEMBLY MEMBER CATALINA CRUZ: Thank  
11 you, Chair. So, I think one of the most important  
12 things we have to do at city and state, or at least  
13 the most basic thing is allocate some funding to do  
14 (inaudible) figuring out who are these veterans, what  
15 do they need from us. It's something so basic that  
16 we should know. They should be coming to us to get  
17 the service is a little bit outrageous and frankly  
18 embarrassing. Through the Bill, we're actually going  
19 to look to allocate approximately \$300,000.00 to make  
20 sure that this is unfunded mandate, that this is an  
21 actual, a piece of our state office that can do the  
22 data collection, that can do the delivery of  
23 services, the connecting of whatever services they  
24 don't give for these families and I think that they  
25 can easily replicate something like this. We are

2 dedicating a couple of staffers or even an office to  
3 advocate for the rights of these veteran immigrants.  
4 It's not a heavy list. It's not rocket science. If  
5 we can find money to do a lot of other things, we can  
6 find money for immigrant veterans. It's not going to  
7 take a lot.

8 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you, thank  
9 you for that, and I think we're on the same page,  
10 even through we're at different levels of government,  
11 I think you're going to see the council push,  
12 especially in these last few months, with the new  
13 council, and I just want to publicly commit to  
14 ensuring that that happens in a very real way. So,  
15 thank you, Assembly Member for that, and that review,  
16 and maybe the last question I want to really give, I  
17 want to come back to the service members, Yesenia and  
18 Cesar, who gave us very particular kind of journeys  
19 that they took to make their decision to serve, and  
20 so much sacrifice is part of that, and really the  
21 kind of barriers, and so I just want to give them  
22 both an opportunity to talk and very specifically  
23 talk about some of the most important barriers that  
24 the city agencies can do right now in the city of New

2 York to change that relationship, and maybe we'll  
3 start with Yesenia first.

4                   YESENIA MATA: Thank you, Councilman  
5 Menchaca. I decided to serve because I always wanted  
6 to serve my country. That is, my parents always  
7 installed in me to always serve our community and to  
8 be there for the community, and one of the thing with  
9 me, I decided to go in the enlisted route. When you  
10 have a certain level of education, let's just say I  
11 have a Master's Degree, I could have gone the OCS  
12 route, the officer route, but one of the things I  
13 decided to do was I wanted to go into the enlisted  
14 route. I wanted to start off with the soldiers. I  
15 wanted to see what the soldier were going through,  
16 and one of the most important things, also I wanted  
17 to know why were veterans being deported? Right, so  
18 through that process, when I went into basic  
19 training, it was interesting to see how, I met many  
20 soldiers who just recently became U.S. citizens and  
21 they said that they enlisted because they always  
22 wanted to serve. It was during that process, me  
23 being an enlisted member of the U.S. Army Reserve  
24 that I met many soldiers who were green card holders.  
25 Currently even in my unit, I have many soldier who

2 are going through this process as well as they reach  
3 out to me confidentially right, and they say hey, I  
4 know you do this type of work where you help people  
5 who are a, you run an immigrant rights organization,  
6 I know your husband's story, look I have a similar  
7 story, or they say that they're trying to protect  
8 their family as well because either their spouse or  
9 their mothers or fathers are undocumented, right, so  
10 this is happening. They are there. It's just that  
11 there's not a proper channel right now that can  
12 really reach out to them or conduct outreach, right,  
13 but I think it's really important how we're also  
14 talking about the veteran side, how there has been  
15 veteran's who have been deported, but also soldiers  
16 who are enlisting, right. There is about 5000 green  
17 card individuals enlisted in the armed forces each  
18 year, right, so the fact that we don't know how many  
19 are enlisted or enlisting from New York or how many  
20 currently are serving right, it's perlamatic. So,  
21 with that being said, it's working closely like  
22 reaching out to Margaret Stock. She's amazing, she  
23 has a lot of people that she is currently working  
24 with. I know like Cesar has a lot of soldiers that  
25 he's currently working with as well, and as for

2 myself, just reach out to the soldiers, reach out to  
3 the units, they're there, but again, there's not  
4 really a proper channel that conducts outreach to the  
5 soldiers.

6 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you for  
7 sharing that and I don't know if there's any press  
8 that's listening to this right now, but this is just  
9 so, this really exposes a nature of humanity here,  
10 playing a role, filling the gaps of city agencies at  
11 city, state, and federal and it is your heart that is  
12 the magnet to space that is full of trust and with  
13 that, so much can happen, and it just happens that  
14 you're a leader in Staten Island doing good immigrant  
15 advocacy work, and that can't be how this happens,  
16 but it is how it's happening now, so we want to say  
17 thank you for that extra work that you're doing to  
18 really ensure that everybody gets justice, but it  
19 just continues to expose the nature of what we're  
20 talking about here. So, I want to say thank you for  
21 that extra commitment on top of your service. Cesar,  
22 and then I'm going to hand it over to Chair Dinowitz.  
23 Cesar, I think you are muted.

24 CESAR VARGAS: I'm good. Thank you,  
25 Chairs. I really appreciate the time and in terms of

2 what concrete steps Assembly Woman Catalina Cruz  
3 mentioned, we don't have to reinvent the wheel.  
4 Right now, we have an opportunity to work together  
5 with Coco, with DVS, with MOIA. We have resources  
6 here. It's about us working together and most  
7 importantly, I think right now, why we're having this  
8 hearing, so, thank you both chairs for really holding  
9 this hearing because this is the first step to really  
10 ensuring that government acknowledges that there is  
11 an issues, acknowledges that we need to have a public  
12 conversation about non-citizen service members and  
13 immigrant military families, so today is a big step  
14 of what we are going to do and in terms of second  
15 steps, it's really if we can have money to pay some  
16 reluctant city workers \$500 to take the vaccine, I'm  
17 sure we can have funding to ensure that we can  
18 resources for service members and their families to  
19 tap into legal services, mental health services, and  
20 to provide the resources to DVS and MOIA to outreach  
21 to those communities that at times, don't feel that  
22 they can turn to. The websites themselves sometimes,  
23 if you visit the DVS or MOIA website, when it comes  
24 to DVS, it doesn't really particular focus on  
25 immigrant services for non-citizens, or even MOIA, it

2 doesn't talk about military, so it really the  
3 welcoming. How do we welcome these service members  
4 to let them know their government is here to support  
5 them, and as Council Member Menchaca, I think you've  
6 been a champion of language access, we have non-  
7 citizen veterans who, as Council Member Chin  
8 mentioned, who don't speak English or who have  
9 limited English ability, so we also need to get into  
10 those ethnic media and really provide those resources  
11 and on that, and lastly, I actually want to show this  
12 poster about, a little bit about, I visited Tijuana  
13 and this is, they call this the bunker, and this is  
14 soldiers who, veterans who have been deported. Two  
15 of them are from New York City, and right now,  
16 they're in limbo as Coco mentioned. Many of them are  
17 in New York City, some are fortunate, while most of  
18 them are banished by their own country, and this is  
19 unacceptable and right now, they're asking, not just  
20 from the federal government for help, but their  
21 asking from their local government for help, for  
22 support to really let them know that the city has  
23 their back, they're own neighborhood can have their  
24 back, so for me, I am committed to working with  
25 incredible public servants and Margaret and Assembly

2 Woman Catalina Cruz and Yesenia and Coco, we're  
3 working to support our government partners and this  
4 about working together and making sure that we can  
5 together, create concrete data so we can do the  
6 outreach necessary and ultimately to really provide  
7 this service so people can become citizens, people  
8 can get their VA benefits, people can get mental  
9 services that they need for our service members.

10 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you, thank  
11 you, Cesar again for your service as a public servant  
12 and military service as well. A very powerful, not  
13 just your testimony, but everything that you're doing  
14 right now, and I want to just give the opportunity  
15 really quick to the Assistant Commissioner at DVS,  
16 are you aware of those two deported New Yorkers that  
17 are seeking services, is that something that's on  
18 your radar? If we can unmute you?

19 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER AMAURI ESPINAL:  
20 Thank you, Chair, so no, I am not aware of those.  
21 I'd be more than happy to work with Cesar and you  
22 know, analyze intimate details of their current  
23 situation, you know, try to assist them with their  
24 needs. Yes, absolutely.

2 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Beautiful, and I  
3 will join in on that, and I'm sure Chair Dinowitz as  
4 well. So, thank you for that. So, let's make that  
5 connection, and with that, I will pause and hand it  
6 over to Chair Dinowitz.

7 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Thank you, Chair  
8 Menchaca. Thank you. I want to make sure I get the  
9 ranks correct, Lieutenant Colonel Stock, Corporal  
10 Vargas, and Specialist Mata, not only for your  
11 service, but as Specialist Mata said, the sacrifices  
12 and the service of your family members, your friends,  
13 and your loved ones. So, Lieutenant Colonel Stock  
14 spoke about in her own world, she's dealing with  
15 immigrant foreign-born veterans, and this goes back  
16 to kind of the same things we've been talking about  
17 for a couple of hours now. I'm interested to know  
18 what the communication is between DVS and these, and  
19 the lawyers of the non-profits and the providers, is  
20 there communication between the work that you all do  
21 because it's, you know, we're all here for our  
22 veterans, specifically to of course, our foreign-born  
23 veterans, we all want the same thing, I assume, we  
24 all want the same thing. So, what is that  
25 communication like? I mean, I guess ask Lieutenant

2 Colonel Stock. What kind of communication exists  
3 there?

4 MARGARET STOCK: Unfortunately, the only  
5 communication I think I've had with DVS is  
6 occasionally when I've come give a seminar on how to  
7 help immigrant veterans in New York. There's been  
8 somebody from DVS in the audience.

9 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Well, it's good  
10 that, you know, I always look for the positive. It  
11 is good that they showed up, but this just seems like  
12 an incredible opportunity to do the thing that we're  
13 having trouble doing, which is identifying foreign-  
14 born veterans and it seems like you have this  
15 incredible resource, not only Lieutenant Colonel  
16 Stock's organization, but I don't know how many there  
17 are throughout the city or the state, and I don't  
18 know if you have a list of these organizations or  
19 contacts, but it may be worth for someone at DVS and  
20 MOIA to actually do proactive outreach. You know,  
21 we've been talking a lot about different ways to  
22 identify people through proactive outreach, it seems  
23 like an incredible opportunity to identify the  
24 foreign-born veterans because even if they're dealing  
25 with struggle, you know, around immigration, they may

2 not know DVS serves everyone. New York City DVS  
3 serves everyone regardless of their, or supposed to,  
4 I see Lieutenant Stock's hand up, they're supposed to  
5 serve everyone regardless of immigration status and  
6 discharge status. Lieutenant Colonel?

7 MARGARET STOCK: So, I just wanted to  
8 mention, I don't want to dump on DVS, but the  
9 national VA just recently discovered there were  
10 immigration issues with (inaudible) so don't feel  
11 bad. Literally, in the last six months, they  
12 suddenly woke up and said oh my god, we have  
13 immigrant veterans and the VA hasn't been serving  
14 them, and so now, there's a new initiative. Dennis  
15 McDenna, the secretary of the VA has stated an  
16 initiative to try to bring serves to the VA, so the  
17 national VA wasn't really tracking this issue at all,  
18 and I think DVS was actually tracking more than they  
19 were. So, I did want to just throw that out there  
20 for you, but the national VA is now sending people to  
21 training and trying to get classes and asking from  
22 input from immigrant veterans and that sort of thing,  
23 but they weren't doing it until about six months ago.

24 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Good. I mean, it's  
25 good that steps are being taken forward. I know DVS

2 is sort of a smaller agency compared with a lot of  
3 the other agencies, but again, there's already  
4 incredible work being done on behalf of our immigrant  
5 veterans and I really urge you to work together with  
6 organizations that are already doing, you know, doing  
7 the work. I don't have any further questions. I  
8 want to give it back to Chair Menchaca or any other  
9 council member who may have something else to add.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL HARBANI AHUJA: I'm  
11 just going to pause here quickly and ask if any other  
12 council members have questions at this time. We're  
13 not seeing any other hands. This was our final  
14 public panel, so I also just wanted to ask if we have  
15 inadvertently missed anyone that registered to  
16 testify today and has yet to be called. You can use  
17 the Zoom raise hand function now, and I will call on  
18 your in the order in which you have raised your  
19 hands. Okay, just confirming we have no further  
20 testimonies, I'll turn it back to Chair Menchaca.

21 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you, and I  
22 want to again thank the Assistant Commissioner and  
23 Director for staying on and really engaging us. For  
24 final remarks, Chair Dinowitz, you want to make some  
25 final remarks, then I'll close us off.

2 CHAIR ERIC DINOWITZ: Sure. I just want  
3 to thank, first, my Co-Chair for this meeting, Chair  
4 Menchaca who I know is deeply committed to our  
5 immigrant communities here in New York and beyond,  
6 and centers a lot of his work on his heart. It's who  
7 he is, and I deeply trust that he wants to better the  
8 lives of our immigrant brothers and sisters, our  
9 neighbor, and I want to thank, of course, the  
10 committee staff, our panelist, Lieutenant Colonel  
11 Stock, Corporal Vargas, Specialist Mata, Assembly  
12 Member Cruz, and Coco Culhane, DVS and MOIA for  
13 coming and for answering questions, but also engaging  
14 in a conversation, you know, regardless of rather or  
15 not everything is going perfectly, we know there's  
16 more work to do, and I believe that our city agencies  
17 want to do that work, want to better the lives our  
18 foreign-born veterans. I look forward to continued  
19 conversations and continued work between myself, the  
20 Chair, other stakeholders and the city agencies. I  
21 think today, we uncovered a lot of important  
22 information, but also reached a lot of important  
23 conclusion as to ways we can move forward to really  
24 ensure that our foreign-born veterans are getting the  
25 support and care that not only they need, but have

2 earned. I think maybe, maybe more than many other  
3 groups, you know, wearing that uniform and literally  
4 putting your life on the line for a country in which  
5 you were not born, I don't know if there's a better  
6 sign of patriotism than that, so I look forward to  
7 continued conversations, continued work to make sure  
8 our foreign-born veterans get the support that they  
9 need. Thank you.

10 CHAIR CARLOS MENCHACA: Thank you, Chair  
11 Dinowitz, and I will join your in all the thank yous  
12 to those who made today's historic moment powerful  
13 and hopefully has moved all of us to action, and we  
14 cannot waste time. I know that there is a lot of  
15 transition right now in the city council and in the  
16 state even, and the city, but those conditions should  
17 not remove us from our commitment to veterans who are  
18 serving today or have served, and those family  
19 members that are connected to those service members,  
20 and I'm just super grateful to always listen to  
21 incredible and powerful testimony that have very  
22 specific things that we can do as a city. We can't  
23 change federal law, but we can change our  
24 relationship with people in our neighborhoods, and  
25 that is the most powerful thing that we can do. You

2 heard it right here that there are relationships  
3 being formed between the soldiers and that is how  
4 they're getting access to services and rethinking how  
5 government can help them as they move through the  
6 citizenship process. That is a right that they have.  
7 This is not something that we're giving them as a  
8 throw away thing. This is the right that they have  
9 as they serve, and so everything that was presented I  
10 want to hold, and before we leave and transition as a  
11 city council, I want to work with Chair Dinowitz on a  
12 report after this hearing to really, in a concrete  
13 way, work on these issues, and then finally what I  
14 want to say is that the leadership here that was  
15 lacking, we did not have the Commissioners. I just  
16 want confirmation that you all are going to talk to  
17 the Commissioners and that we can bring them in on a  
18 call, that the Chair and I can lead with staff about  
19 post hearing results, and if that's possible, I think  
20 we're going to be able to make some headway now, and  
21 really change the relationship. That's where it  
22 starts and when we have good relationship, we have  
23 good outcomes. When we can start taking data and  
24 information, we can keep ourselves accountable.  
25 That's what is driving this, and so, thank you, thank

2 you to the staff, and a special thank you to Cesar

3 Vargas and Yesenia Mata who have been doing

4 incredible work on the ground, not just for the city

5 of New York, but for our immigrant communities.

6 Thank you all, and with that, I will close this

7 hearing. Thank you all.

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C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date November 15, 2021