

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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April 23, 2026

Start: 10:06 a.m.

Recess: 12:46 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - 8th Floor- Hearing
Room 3

B E F O R E: Frank Morano,
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Carmen N. De La Rosa
James F. Gennaro
Vicki Paladino
Inna Vernikov
Phil Wong

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

Yesenia Mata
Commissioner, Department of Veterans Services

Donee Smalls
Department of Veterans Services

Noah Bray
ED of Veterans Support Services

Nicole Orlando
NYC DVS

Joseph Wein
Self

Jennie Bucove
Gallup NYC

Christina Brown Fisher
Gallop NYC

Coco Culhane
Veterans Advocacy Project

Lieutenant G. Rieco Diaz
American Legion Riders

Mike Munoz
American Legion Post 917

Ricardo Garcia
American Legion

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

Douglas Brewsher
Self

Michael Matos
Five Borough Veterans

Camille Okonkwo
New York Health Foundation

Roman Baca
Exit 12

Joshua Sooklal
Hope for the Warriors

Timothy Pena
Veterans Justice Project

Joe Bello
NY Met Lovers

Nadia Asencio
Self

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, this is a mic check for the Committee on Veterans. Today's date is April 23rd, 2026. We're located in Hearing Room 3, and this is being recorded by Mike Kane.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, welcome to today's New York City Council— give me one second. Good morning, welcome to this New York City Council hearing for the Committee on Veterans. Please silence all cell phone electronic devices. Moving forward, no one is to approach the dais.

If you wish to participate in today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms. Thank you for your cooperation. Chair, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [GAVEL] Good morning, I'm Council Member Frank Morano. I have the privilege of Chairing the Committee on Veterans. I wanna thank everybody for joining us or watching on television or on the internet. And, um, this is a hearing that I've been very, very eager to do. Uh, this oversight hearing is about serving post-9/11 veterans.

Uh, the Committee is looking forward to hearing from the New York City Department of Veterans Services, particularly their distinguished

1 commissioner, and other stakeholders including
2 veterans themselves, veteran advocates, and anybody
3 that's been paying attention to this issue on how the
4 city is doing in serving this unique and growing
5 population of veterans.

6 Before diving into our oversight topic, I also
7 wanna mention that we will be hearing the following
8 piece of legislation, and anybody is welcome to
9 comment on this legislation as well. This is Intro
10 Number 0488-2026, which is, uh, sponsored by my
11 colleague Council Member Inna Vernikov, which would
12 require an annual report from the Department of
13 Housing Preservation and Development on the number of
14 veterans applying for housing in city-run Mitchell
15 Lama developments, the number of veterans being
16 selected for occupancy, and the documentary
17 requirements and safeguards in place to ensure that
18 applicants benefiting from a veteran preference are
19 in fact veterans.

20 And, uh, we will have Council Member Vernikov
21 speak about her bill in just a bit. Uh, now as far
as our oversight topic goes, New York City is home to
anywhere between 125,000 and 200,000 veterans,
including nearly 28,000 who have served in the

1 post-9/11 era. Uh, this is a generation whose
2 military service has been shaped by September 11th
3 and extended deployments to, among other places, the
4 conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. And these are
5 folks that are now building their lives here in New
6 York City.

7 Um, It's really- this is the hearing that I've
8 been particularly eager to do. Uh, growing up in
9 Staten Island and knowing so many first responders,
10 uh, that died in the World Trade Center, it really
11 marks a moment in my life before and after. Uh, not
12 only in terms of, uh, the issues that were related to
13 Ground Zero, but all of the military conflicts that
14 happened afterwards. But when it comes to the issue
15 of, um, post-9/11 veterans, so many of the other
16 conflicts that I've studied over the years, so many
17 of the veterans that I've talked to, it's really
18 something that I've largely viewed as happening
19 before, as being history.

20 Uh, the post-9/11 veterans, uh, for me are my
21 peers. Uh, this is the first group of veterans that,
uh, hmm, have either been the same age or younger,
uh, than me, and, uh, that it, it causes you to view
it through a very different worldview. And the more

1 I've dug into the issues, uh, related to post-9/11
2 issue— uh, post-9/11 veterans, the more I've seen how
3 unique, uh, the challenges that they're facing are
4 and how unique the skill set that they bring to the
5 table in so many different fields are. Um, just like
6 veterans of World War I and the, ah, first Persian
7 Gulf War, they've had all sorts of new health issues
8 that the existing health care infrastructure wasn't
9 necessarily well suited to address. Uh, just like,
10 uh, victims of World War II, some of them came home
11 with very visible injuries, uh, which in some cases
12 affected not only their physical ability to do
13 certain jobs but their mental outlook.

14 Uh, just like, uh, veterans of Vietnam, uh, some
15 of the conflicts that they were involved in weren't
16 that popular, and believe it or not, that actually,
17 um, reflected in a lot of the ways that their folks
18 were greeting them when they came back, uh, from
19 fighting overseas. And, uh, just like veterans of,
20 uh, the Korean War and other conflicts, they've had a
21 lot of, uh, ailments that aren't necessarily visible.
But the two things that separate them now in this era
that we're living in now are, one, the fact that
unlike veterans that came home from Vietnam, from

1
2 World War II, from Korea, we have a much, much lower
3 percentage of the population that are veterans that
4 have served in the military.

5 So where is— if you came home in a prior
6 conflict, you had a pretty good chance of running
7 into a veteran at the bowling alley, at the Elks
8 Club, or at a neighborhood restaurant. It's much,
9 much fewer and far between in terms of encountering
10 post-9/11 veterans.

11 The other issue is, because of the age of a lot
12 of the folks that we're talking about here, they are
13 not retirees in many instances. They are still in
14 the midst of their career. They're still in— in the
15 midst of, uh, starting a family, managing their
16 family, being a head of household, balancing all of
17 that while potentially trying to fight with, uh,
18 state, city, and federal bureaucracy about the
19 benefits that they're entitled to.

20 Uh, so, um, this is a group that, uh, I am very,
21 very committed to serving, to helping, and to using
this hearing as a platform to find out how the City
Council can best do that.

My goal, uh, in this hearing is not only to focus
the attention of the City Council on issues that are

1 related to post-9/11 veterans and to try to come up
2 with as much legislation that we can do to help them.
3 If there's budgetary priorities that need to be
4 refocused in their direction, we're gonna try to do
5 that. Uh, but it's also to focus the attention of
6 the public on the plight of post-9/11 veterans.

7 Unfortunately, one of the things that's in the
8 City Council now is, uh, you don't have a single
9 veteran. And what that often leads to is a veteran's
10 perspective being ignored. I can tell you, my
11 colleagues on the left and on the right, um, when I
12 talk to them about veterans' issues, every single one
13 of them seems eager to help. Um, folks on the left
14 are eager to prioritize health care-related issues
15 and housing and things— and social services-related
16 issues.

17 Folks on the right, uh, they're desperate to do
18 anything to prove their determination to serve people
19 in uniform and folks that they believe have fought
20 for America. Veterans issues should be the one area
21 where there is no debate, where there is universal
consensus on not whether we should do something, but
how much we could do. And unfortunately, uh,

1 budgetarily, uh, the veterans in this city are still
2 not getting their just due.

3 I'm determined through these hearings,
4 particularly this one, to make sure that the
5 perspective of veterans is heard. And, uh, I am
6 going to be amplifying what we hear today, uh,
7 throughout every corner of the city, especially in my
8 district in, um, in New York City. Um, the other
9 thing about post-9/11 veterans that's very different
10 from their predecessors— and I'm sure you'll hear
11 this from others today that are more expert than me—
12 is because of the change in women being able to serve
13 in combat. It's a much higher percentage of people
14 that are female veterans, uh, because of the
15 abolition of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. There's a much
16 higher percentage of LGBTQ, uh, folks. Those all
17 bring with it a very separate, um, set of challenges.
18 And because of what everybody in New York City is
19 facing right now, the issue of affordability, you
20 have a situation where in New York City veterans are
21 trying to, in some cases, transition back to civilian
life while battling the issues of affordability,
which make New York not so affordable for so many.

1 Uh, at this point, before I introduce my other
2 colleagues, I want to welcome, uh, the aforementioned
3 Council Member Inna Vernikov.

4 Uh, before she talks about her legislation, uh,
5 the folks of this city should know what a warrior
6 Council Member Vernikov is, uh, for veterans. Uh, I
7 think it says a great deal, uh, the fact that her,
8 her aide is, uh, a combat veteran who's himself a
9 post-9/11 veteran, Troy. Uh, but, uh, she is someone
10 who eats, breathes, and sleeps veterans issues, uh,
11 not just for the veterans that live and are fortunate
12 enough to have her as a Council Member in Brooklyn,
13 but for veterans, uh, throughout this city. And I
14 could tell you on this specific piece of legislation,
15 this is, uh, not a new issue for her, and, uh, she's
16 worked doggedly to get it passed in the last City
17 Council, and hopefully we can do it in this City
18 Council. Council Member Vernikov, thank you.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER VERNIKOV: Thank you very much,
20 Council Member Morano. Good afternoon, everyone.
21 It's great to see Introduction 488 before this
Committee today. Intro 488 would require that the
Department of Housing Preservation and Development

submit reports on veteran preference in Mitchell-Lama developments.

My rationale for this bill is simple. This is a great resource already in place for those who have served this country, and too many are missing out on it. New York City is home to more than 100,000 veterans, including over 30,000 in the borough of Brooklyn. Mitchell-Lama Housing dates to the— dates back to the 1950s, and has many of the qualities that New Yorkers seek and that veterans need. Every Mitchell-Lama building is an elevator building, which is high up there as a top need. The veterans' preference on Mitchell-Lama waiting list for housing is one of the great tools we must utilize, not only to combat veterans homelessness or veterans facing housing insecurity, but do so in a way that is permanent, affordable, and sustainable to keep veterans in our city at a time when the cost of living is far too high.

All too often, this resource for veterans falls by the wayside. As a Veterans Committee— at a Veterans Committee hearing last session, former Commissioner James Hendon of the Department of

Veterans Services said that the top issue facing the city's veterans is not self-identifying as a veteran.

This pattern extends to veteran preference as well. It's not widely known about. At a recent legislative breakfast hosted by the VFW in Queens, housing was identified as a top need facing the city's veterans.

In a 2012 report by the Office of the State Comptroller, 18 sampled Mitchell-Lama housing developments with open waiting lists were reviewed. These developments filled 332 vacancies during the review period, and only 14 of which were filled by a veteran. Those findings also found that veterans were passed over for vacancies at some locations, including two developments in Manhattan.

These developments are suitable housing for all sorts of veterans in a variety of financial situations and represent a permanent investment in the city because those who get into Mitchell-Lama housing often like it and stay there.

As a city, we need to do a better job of ensuring this preference is known about and that veterans' preference is taking place on select runs.

I'd like to thank this Committee for hearing this bill, Chair Morano, Members of the Committee, and all those who are here today and I ask that my colleagues sign on to Intro 488. And I also like to thank Mike Munoz, who's a veteran here with us today, who has utilized this preference and Troy Olson, my legislative director, who is also a veteran, as mentioned earlier, for their service to this great country. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much Council Member Vernikov. Um, here in New York, the challenges that post-9/11 veterans are facing are particularly evident. More than half of recently separated veterans report a service-connected disability, and about 1 in 4 experience symptoms of PTSD or depression. And while most are insured, many are working. Too many report difficulty navigating care services or knowing where to turn. And when all these systems fail, often one of the clearest and most immediate consequences is housing instability. And in a city where securing housing is one of the hardest and most expensive endeavors, many newly transitioned veterans find themselves literally at

the brink of homelessness and sometimes actually homeless.

Uh, while over the past decade New York City has reduced veteran homelessness by— homelessness by more than 85%, declining from over 4,600 veterans in shelters in 2011 to just over 600 in 2024. Uh, this progress doesn't eliminate many posts— the risk that many post-9/11 veterans face, and we're gonna work just as hard until that number goes from 600 to zero.

Um, I'm looking forward to today's testimony and to strengthening support for post-9/11 veterans throughout New York City. I want to acknowledge, uh, my colleagues on the Committee who are here today and And folks should know who are watching on television or, or in the room that, uh, we come from very different backgrounds, different political parties, different ethnicities, different boroughs, uh, but we are all absolutely 100% united in how to best serve New York's veterans, uh, particularly post-9/11 veterans.

I first want to welcome, uh, Council Member Phil Wong. Thank you and, uh, Council Member, uh, Carmen De La Rosa. Thank you. And, uh, Council Member Vernikov, who you just heard from. I also want to

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2 conclude, uh, by thanking the Veterans Committee
3 staff, uh, policy analyst Mahnoor Butt, uh, Financial
4 Analyst Margaret Barnsley, uh, for their hard work
5 in, uh, preparing for this hearing. Uh, but I want
6 to give a special thank you, uh, to our legislative
7 counsel Alejandro Carvajal, who has, uh, moved on to
8 greener pastures, and this will be his last Committee
9 hearing, uh, as our Legislative Counsel. And I'll
10 tell you, Alejandro, uh, my only regret about our
11 time together is that it's been too short. And you
12 certainly have left big shoes to fill for Hannah
13 Cohn, the colleague to your right. So thank you.

14 Uh, alright, I want to now turn it over to our
15 Committee Counsel to administer the oath to witnesses
16 from the Administration, uh, at least three-quarters
17 of whom are joining me in color coordinating, wearing
18 red in solidarity with our veterans. Thank you.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good morning. Um, could you
20 please raise your right hands? Do you affirm to tell
21 the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth
in your testimony before this Committee, and to
respond honestly to Council Member questions? I'll
call on you one by one. Commissioner Mata?

YESENIA MATA: Yes, I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Donee Smalls?

DONEE SMALLS: Yes, I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Nicole Orlando?

NICOLE ORLANDO: Yes, I do,

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I think Derek Bray?

NOAH BRAY: Uh, Noah Bray. Yes, I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Oh, sorry about that. Wrong
on the slip.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: It sounded like he said no,
right?

NOAH BRAY: That's right.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Uh, as a reminder
to all of our witnesses, please state your name, uh,
for the record prior to your testimony. Uh, thank
you so much, and you may begin.

YESENIA MATA: Good morning, Chair Morano and
Members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is
Yesenia Mata, and I am the Commissioner of the New
York City Department of Veterans Services. Thank you
for the opportunity to testify today on the needs of
post-9/11 veterans and the city's effort to serve
this generation. You may notice that my team and I
are wearing red today to remember and honor those who
are currently deployed. This work is deeply personal

1 to me. I still serve in uniform as a captain in the
2 United States Army Reserve, and I have the privilege
3 of leading an agency shaped in no small part by
4 fellow post-9/11 veterans who are committed every day
5 to making New York City a better place for those who
6 have served.

7 Post-9/11 veterans now represent a significant
8 share of the veteran community nationally, comprising
9 roughly 28% of the total veteran population. Here in
10 New York City, our data reflects a comparable
11 presence. According to the US Census Bureau,
12 approximately 28,555 Veterans in New York City, or
13 about 23% of the city's veteran population, served in
14 the post-9/11 era. The highest concentration of
15 these veterans are in Queens, followed by Brooklyn.

16 Here in New York City, they are among our most
17 diverse and highly educated veterans, bringing
18 valuable skills and leadership to our communities.
19 Looking at education alone, there are over 6,000
20 students and dependents using their post-9/11 GI Bill
21 education benefits across the 5 boroughs. Data at
both the national and local level shows that
post-9/11 veterans are often earlier in their
civilian journeys, as many separate, separate from

1 service after their initial enlistment or shortly
2 thereafter.

3 While service lengths vary, a significant portion
4 served between roughly 5 and 10 years, meaning many
5 are transitioning into the workforce, pursuing higher
6 education, or exploring entrepreneurship at a
7 critical stage in their lives.

8 At the same time, research shows this cohort
9 experiences higher levels of psychological distress
10 and is more likely to face substance use challenges.
11 Studies from the US Department of Veterans Affairs
12 indicate that post-9/11 veterans have elevated rates
13 of conditions such as PTSD and depression. National
14 data also shows that approximately 1 in 10 veterans
15 who access VA care are diagnosed with a substance use
16 disorder, with higher risk among younger veterans and
17 those with recent service.

18 Taken together, these realities underscore the
19 need for thoughtful, targeted, and holistic
20 approaches to support for post-9/11 veterans as they
21 navigate both immediate transitions and long-term
stability. At the Department of Veterans Services,
we are working intentionally to ensure our outreach

strategies and services are responsive to these evolving needs.

Mental health remains a critical priority through our coordination with the New York State Joseph Dwyer Program, we support peer-to-peer engagement models that reduce isolation, build community, and encourage health-seeking behaviors. Through our most recent Dwyer Program cycle, we supported 31 community-based organizations across the 5 boroughs, reaching as many as 510 participants in a single month.

These outcomes reinforce that peer-based models are an effective and culturally competent way to connect veterans to care. At the same time, our work shows that the needs of post-9/11 veterans extend beyond the individual and deeply affect families and children. Supporting the full veteran household must remain a priority.

For this generation, service has often been a family experience. Spouses, caregivers, and children have navigated repeated deployments, long separations, and reintegration alongside them. In fact, research from Brown University shows that half of all post-9/11 service members have deployed more than once.

We must also continue to support our Gold Star families from the post-9/11 generation, ensuring they have access to mental health, support community, and sustain engagement. Our service data further reinforces this need. This fiscal year, the majority of the cases coming through our VetConnect platform have been concentrated in housing assistance, veteran benefits and claims navigation, and economic mobility.

I also want to emphasize that as a new Commissioner, I take seriously how we think about and

1
2 use data. I know that much of the data we will
3 discuss today precedes my tenure, but moving forward,
4 I am focused on strengthening how data at DBS is
5 captured, analyzed, and reported moving forward.

6 Our team is working to ensure that our metrics
7 reflect both community needs and the full scope of
8 the work being done. We are examining the systems we
9 use to make referrals, track outcomes, and measure
10 impact and improve them where necessary. When it
11 comes to understanding what is happening in the
12 community, no stone should be left unturned. Our
13 response must be informed by accurate, credible data.

14 Recently, we achieved the most successful month
15 of veteran housing placement in the agency's history,
16 placing 28 veterans and families into permanent
17 housing. It reflects what's possible when the right
18 systems are in place, teams are supported, and how
19 that impact extends beyond individual veterans to
20 strengthen the broader community.

21 We also recognize that engagement requires
visibility and trust. Since stepping into this role,
I have convened long overdue roundtables on key
issues, including women veterans and post-9/11
veterans, with more to come. Our outreach strategy

continues to evolve to meet veterans where they are on campuses and workplaces at community events and across digital platforms. We are also working to address the ongoing challenge of self-identification by making our services more accessible, relevant, and responsive.

We do not want the burden to fall on the veteran to find us. We are committed to finding them, and we are eager to work with fellow commissioners and city agencies to ensure that Local Law 37 is fully implemented so that veterans who come into contact with the city services are connected to our agency for support.

I want to be clear, regardless of when a veteran served, every individual who walks through our doors will be treated with the highest level of respect and dignity. We are grateful for the Committee's continued partnership and attention to this important work.

We look forward to working together to ensure that all veterans, including those that have served in the post-9/11 era, have access to the opportunities and support they deserve. Thank you, and I'm happy to answer questions.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Commissioner, uh,
3 not only for your testimony but, uh, for your energy.
4 And having, uh, attended several of those roundtables
5 you alluded to, uh, I can tell you that, uh, er, your
6 knowledge and experience of the issues that we're
7 talking about is, uh, masterful, but I think you also
8 may have a couple of clones because I don't know how
9 you cover the amount of ground you do around the
city, uh, every single day. So it's a real treat to
have you.

10 I wanna welcome, uh, my colleague and, uh, not
11 only a great Council Member, but the person who has
12 the distinction of representing more veterans than
13 any other Council Member in the entire city, uh,
14 distinguished Council Member from Queens, Vicki
Paladino. Thank you, thank you, Council Member.

15 Um, alright, I will begin and then toss it over
16 to my colleagues. Uh, Commissioner, you highlighted
17 outreach, coordination, and participation numbers,
18 which are all encouraging, uh, but when a post-9/11
19 veteran walks through your doors, what are the
20 specific outcomes we should expect to see improved,
21 whether that's housing stability, employment, or

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1 means to outreach, what does it mean to actually
2 reach, what does it mean the number of people that
3 attended, what does it mean when a refer- an intake
4 is being done, when a referral is being done, and
5 then when you refer them, what's the follow-up?

6 That is what has been currently missing at DBS,
7 and I'm currently working with the housing team and
8 the claims team who at their own capacity have been
9 collecting this data really do care about this issue,
10 but it also comes down to someone that has that
11 experience like myself. I come from the nonprofit
12 sector, so I do know what it means to bring in
13 deliverables, to have that reporting structure, to
14 report to every city agency, but agencies, but as
15 well to the community.

16 So, um, I gave, uh, ah, an overview of what an
17 individual can see when they come to DVS, but also as
18 DVS, I am taking accountability on that and what we
19 need to change within the agency, which is data
20 reporting.

21 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: You mentioned in your
testimony that many services are being accessed
through VetConnect. Do we have a clear sense of how
many post-9/11 veterans in New York City are not

1
2 using VetConnect and what the biggest barriers are to
3 reaching them? One of the benefits of their age and
4 being a little younger is one thinks they might be a
5 little bit more tech savvy than their fathers or
6 grandfathers might be?

7 YESENIA MATA: Well, I could say that in Fiscal
8 Year 2026, the housing team assisted 1,264 veterans
9 and our claims team assisted 4,644 veterans. Um, and
10 out of that, 100- 1,200 were post-9/11 veterans.
11 What we are seeing with VetConnect, and I am all for
12 transparency, is VetConnect, we call- it's actually
13 Combined Arms. That's software. So I think I'm just
14 gonna keep it in, in those terms, like the software.

15 However, even that software itself, again, coming
16 in as someone that has experience in, in data, quite
17 frankly, we are also reviewing it and analyzing it.
18 And I really would like to work, work with you all to
19 see what systems should be better in place when it
20 comes to software, because that particular software
21 doesn't track everything that the DBS does. For
example, it doesn't track the events that we go to or
the partnerships that we have. And even if we do
want to add a partner, it's very tedious for the
partners to be added.

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2 So for example, if you are, ah, non-designated,
3 um, non-designated, ah, veteran, ah, nonprofit per
4 se, it is difficult to even implement you into the
5 system because it does take time. So, what I just
6 want to say is that we are reviewing the systems in
7 place to see if, if this software is even the one
8 that we need to work with, that it needs to work
9 within the agency.

10 Again, um, maybe there's something that we just
11 need to be improving within the system, right? So I
12 would like to have this continued conversation with
13 you.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Both you and Council Member
15 Vernikov alluded to an issue that we hear about in
16 just about every hearing, which is the
17 self-identification gap, right? Uh, from your
18 perspective, is the issue awareness? Is it trust?
19 Or is it the relevance of services? And what do you
20 think the single most important change we— meaning
21 we, the City Council— can make is to get more
22 post-9/11 veterans to raise their hand and say, yes,
23 I'm a veteran?

24 YESENIA MATA: What you mentioned, all three are
25 correct. I think when it comes to awareness,

1 oftentimes I- and I keep emphasizing this and uh,
2 because then I'm just going to give an example as
3 myself, as, as a woman who's currently serving, uh,
4 oftentimes when people even look at me, they don't
5 think that I'm the one that's serving or when I'm
6 with my husband, right? They think that, oh, they
7 just thank him for his serving. I'm like, wait a
8 minute, we're both the same rank.

9 Like, so that's just an example, right? That,
10 that, that when it comes to awareness, but also the
11 diversity within the military, right? I, we all have
12 different backgrounds. We have- we communicate
13 differently. So that is what, as DBS, we've been
14 trying to portray moving forward. And I think with
15 these roundtables that- and thank you, Council
16 Member, uh, Morano, for being part of every, every
17 roundtable and here in the Committee too. Um, we are
18 hoping that as we are seeing this diversity, whether
19 it is like women or, or different backgrounds, that
20 it just brings us back to one mission, which is
21 supporting the veteran community. But even further
to that, uh, what will be helpful is that the, the
partnership and support on ensuring that every agency
does implement Local Law 37, which is, um, just to

1
2 give a, a brief description at, at, at, at that, it
3 was 2 years ago this Local Law 37 passed that, uh,
4 asked every agency to put in their forms, have you
served?

5 That is a way for us to also know and identify
6 what services our veterans are receiving and what
7 borough are they going to, what agencies and
8 nonprofits they're going to. However, and again, out
9 of transparency here, that hasn't been implemented.
10 Within my 2 months being here, I have been working
11 very closely with the team on holding meetings with
12 city- different agencies, and they're really looking
13 forward to working with us. And I'm just gonna give
14 an example, for example, MOPD, DSS, um, and right
15 now, uh, I'm working with DCWP because DCWP is going
16 to be the first one that we are going to be working
17 with to implement Local Law 37.

18 So my goal is that this, um, this year, this
19 Local Law 37 is fully implemented.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Um, I have 2 more questions
21 for this round, and then I'll invite my colleagues to
have at it. And, uh, then I have a few more for you.
The- you cited higher rates of PTSD, and I alluded to
it earlier, depression and substance abuse among

1
2 post-9/11 veterans. Uh, er, are we currently meeting
3 that level of need in New York City or are we still
4 playing catch-up? And where specifically are the
gaps?

5 YESENIA MATA: Well, as, as an agency, when a
6 veteran does come in or we, we are aware of a veteran
7 having any sort of mental, mental, uh, mental crisis
8 or need, we, we do the intake, but then we refer them
9 to the VA or we refer them to the 988 crisis hotline.
10 But as well, um, oftentimes they just are in need of
11 a community, and that's where the Dwyer program does
12 come in. Uh, again, we partner up with 31
13 organizations, but, uh, from that end, what we are
14 seeing that is lacking is that we do have to do
15 better to showcase that there's more than just 31
16 organizations that do support veterans per se, right?
17 That there's other, um, organizations out there that
18 are doing great work too that really do want to
19 support veterans. I, and I think Council Member, as
20 you mentioned, that, um, that there're many Council
21 Members too that want to support veterans, they just
don't know how. And I think the simple fact of us
amplifying that outreach— for, for us, that's why not
only are we convening, uh, veteran-designated groups

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2 or nonprofits, but we're also convening
3 non-designated veteran organizations. Because what
4 we want to do, um, after all of these meetings that
5 we've been having- I just want to say that I've had
6 close to 100 meetings already- our goal is to go to
7 different boroughs and begin gathering all of these
8 other nonprofits that want to also support.

9 So that when, when I think to, and so I say all
10 of this to answer your question that there has to be
11 better outreach when it comes to that and cultural
12 competency as well when we are working with
13 non-designated veteran groups. Uh, you alluded to
14 your very unique perspective, not only being someone
15 that serves actively in the military, but you're also
16 a military spouse. And it was also heartening to
17 hear that you and your husband are the same rank.
18 It's inspiring that one day I will not have to take
19 all of my wife's orders and and maybe, maybe, maybe
20 we'll be on a level playing field in, in some
21 respect. But, uh, you made an important point about
that service is often a family experience. How are
we measuring whether spouses and children are
actually benefiting from DVS programs and not just
the veteran themselves?

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2 YESENIA MATA: It— well, we as DVS, we hosted the
3 first woman veteran roundtable, and that in itself
4 was um, at the same time, I, I, I want to say it was
5 very heartbreaking on how women have been often left
6 out, out of the conversation. Many of them did
7 mention that they were also mothers. Um, but as DVS,
8 what we are doing is not just, um, meeting with
9 various other groups.

10 For example, Blue Star Families. I know Council
11 Member Morano, you came to the launching of the food
12 pantry that we did with Blue Star Families, and this
13 is a group of, of women, of women who, um, ah, whose
14 husbands serve in the military, and they are just
15 looking for that support of, can someone support us
16 just so we can continue supporting one another? And
17 oftentimes it's just that simple fact, like, just
18 listening to them, supporting them. But even
19 further, what's happening is that with Gold Star
20 families, um, we are looking forward to convening
21 with Council Member Paladino to, to do, to welcome,
uh, a roundtable with Gold Star families, which is
something that hasn't also been done. And we want to
hear directly from them because, as a matter of fact,
today, um, my team members Noah and Donee are going

1 to— to LaGuardia for, for a soldier that's coming
2 back home to ensure that he has a designated, um, um,
3 a dignified, I mean, transfer. Um, unfortunately,
4 the, the soldier passed away and as, as DVS, what we
5 are doing differently now is that not only are we
6 convening the Gold Star families, but every soldier
7 that comes back to New York City, we want to make
8 sure that, that we are there present if they are
9 coming back and they need that, um, dignified
transfer because they passed away.

10 So we want to make sure that not only are we
11 there to unfortunately welcome the soldier in those
12 circumstances, but be there for the family. And we
13 hope that with the Gold Star Roundtable, uh, Council
14 Member Paladino, that they could guide us more on how
15 we could do better to dignify, to have that dignified
16 transfer. Because just to let you know, when I went
17 there the first time, um, because that's gonna be one
18 of our missions being there, it was very sad to see
19 that it was just a family that was there present and
20 there was no more support. And, and, and it, that
21 really, and honestly it pissed me off because we
should be doing more because these soldiers gave
their life for this country.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright, speaking of Council Member Paladino, uh, Council Member, the floor is yours.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: First off, I want to just say thank you. You know, the work you're doing right now, you're bringing us all into the 21st century, which is super, super important. And we have paid a lot of attention to our Vietnam vets, and they are aging out, and now we need to pay attention to the post-9/11 veterans. And that's exactly what you're doing.

My interest, of course, is about— and you did speak to this, which I'm really happy about, uh, you know, about getting them together as families. We're looking for nonprofits that can work together with you.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Um, a couple in my area do come to mind. Because, uh, they are extremely active, but nobody touches veterans.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: We have something called Common Point in my district, and they cater to, you know, seniors and families and just, for lack

1 of a better word, regular folk. Okay. We need to
2 find that we also have, uh, the Korean, uh, community
3 center, which is the largest, uh, Korean center in
4 the entire city of New York in Bayside. Both of
5 these places are located in Bayside and I think at
6 this point in time, I think we should start to
7 perhaps examine what they may- because they are
8 family-oriented in so many ways, dealing with seniors
9 and regular people in their 50s. But I think we
10 should open up a whole dialogue, uh, to the fact that
11 we can help and work together with you, uh, and bring
12 them in. And perhaps the way they, uh, create,
13 again, a lack for a better word, a, a, ah, pre-K
14 organization or for after-school programs for
15 children.

14 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Why not start a new
16 division in these non-for-profits which can actually
17 cater to veterans and their families?

17 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: So I wanted to run that
19 idea by you today. Uh, again, to Frank's point, uh,
20 about doing these roundtables and asking people about
21 what we're gonna do to help the families.

1
2 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

3 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Because in your case,
4 you yourself, children, they all need help.

5 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: So let's just bring
7 them all in, but in a fun sort of a way.

8 YESENIA MATA: Yeah.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Because not everybody
10 is off, for lack of a better word, again. Uh, they
11 are per- they're functioning in our society.

12 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And I just think better
14 care needs to be taken care of those families. So
15 I'm gonna look into the, uh, I don't really have a
16 question, I guess. I'm, I'm just giving you a
17 statement. Uh, I apologize for that. But I just
18 wanna make you aware.

19 So we're gonna work together.

20 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And we're gonna figure
something out because there are so many
non-for-profits that the city funds non-for-profits.
We as Council Members fund nonprofits. So for those
that I do fund heavily, I'd like to know what we

could do to open up a door to our veterans and our veteran families, our younger veterans. Very important.

YESENIA MATA: Thank you for that comment, Councilwoman, because as we are convening the Gold Star families, they are the ones that are going to guide us in this process of how do we do, a better, b-better work around the dignified transfers. But that's another topic.

For example, we're gonna be hosting a disability roundtable soon. Um, and, but we do wanna convene military spouses, children, especially this month was a military, uh, children month, right? And the fact that we didn't do as much to even highlight the service of these children, right? It's, we, we, we do need to do better on that aspect, but we are going to be convening a roundtable on that too.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: The fact that the kids need to know, mhm, that their mom and dads are heroes.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: See, that's, that's another thing. There shouldn't be a stigma.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

1 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: This should be proudly
2 worn as a badge of honor.

3 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And, uh, in attending,
5 uh, police officers' medal ceremonies.

6 YESENIA MATA: Mhm. Mhm.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And the kids come
8 running up to me and we take pictures and all of
9 that. And I bent down and I said, you realize that
10 your dad or your mom, whomever it was, is a real
11 hero? And they looked at me and as if to say, what
do you mean hero? Well, they are a hero.

12 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: They're out on the
14 front lines every day. I think the same thing needs
15 to be brought into a, uh, a broader scope that these
kids actually understand that their moms and dads are
true heroes.

16 YESENIA MATA: Absolutely.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And I think we're gonna
18 work on that. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

19 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, Commissioner, before I
20 turn to my other colleagues, um, you may have
21 mentioned it, I may have missed it. If that's the

1 case, I apologize. But I'm wondering if you could
2 speak, uh, to the legislation that we're considering
3 today, Intro 0488, Council Member Vernikov's, uh,
4 proposal. Have you had a chance to look at it? And
5 if you have, what's your opinion?

6 YESENIA MATA: Yes, well, I'm going to pass it
7 off to Nicole, but before that, I do want to say that
8 we are looking forward to working with the
9 councilwoman and also HPD to make sure that, that we,
10 that this legislation is supported, uh, because we do
11 want to ensure that we, we do review it and, and
12 provide that support that is needed. Um, and Nicole
13 can, um, elaborate a little bit further on this, but,
14 oh, ah, but also other things that can happen to make
15 this even stronger to support the councilwoman.

16 NICOLE ORLANDO: Thank you, Commissioner. Oh,
17 thank you, Commissioner. Thank you, Chair. Um, so
18 for this bill, for Intro 488, we are in support of
19 it, but we do— as Commissioner mentioned, we look
20 forward to working with Council and with HPD. There
21 are some tweaks that we have, um, as we were looking
through it in regards to what documentation is
required, some eligibility, and some clarification on
definitions between veterans and spouses.

Overall, we are in support, but we do look forward to just working on some of those items.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you. I, I think in my 11 months as a Council Member, that's the first time when I've asked any Administration that question they don't begin the, the answer by saying, well, we support the idea of this and we support the bill, what the bill is trying to do, but we don't support it. So thank you for the, uh, clarity and for the, uh, guidepost, which we'll look forward to following.

Um, at this point, I'll turn things over to Council Member Wong.

COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Thank you, Chair. Um, yes, I, I heard from, from your testimony and also from the previous Commissioner, James Hendon, that it is a big problem that veterans, uh, seem don't want to identify themselves as veterans. Uh, can you talk about that? Is that a big— is that— is more apparent on post-9/11 veterans, or how can, what can we do to help? I'm drawing parallels to, to, like, groups, therapy groups of people identifying themselves as, like, alcoholics or drug addicts. We can please talk about it. Yeah.

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2 YESENIA MATA: Yeah. So, so with that, what we,
3 um, I know, and oftentimes in hearings it was, why
4 aren't they self-identifying, right? And what I do
5 like about this, um, this Committee, um, is that it's
6 more so, well, what are we doing to make it easier
7 for them, right? And that is what I, er, earlier
8 what I did mention about Local Law 37. The goal is
9 that there's so many agencies, right? City agencies.
10 So imagine if every city agency did comply with
11 ensuring that Local Law 37 was fully implemented,
12 then we will actually have the opportunity to give
13 access easier to, to veterans to self-identify. And
14 this is why I'm really looking forward to finalizing,
15 um, the, the work with DCWP because they're going to
16 be the first agency that we're partnering up with.
17 And, um, again, it took 2 years in order for this
18 particular legislation to be implemented. And within
19 my leadership, within 2 months, we are already
20 working on ensuring that this is implemented along
21 with the support of my team that made sure that we,
we, gather with various, um, Commissioners.

19 Again, the next one will be working with MOPD,
20 and DSS. They've been fully supportive of this. So,
21 um, there's going to require these conversations. So

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2 with your support, if we can continue meeting with
3 the Commissioners and letting them know that, that
4 this is very much needed, then it will support
5 because it would also not just help that
6 self-identification, but it could also help many of
7 the veteran groups that are on the ground because,
8 uh, I could tell you that what I'm noticing is that
9 many, many of them are, um, many of them are, are in
10 need of funding. And perhaps maybe, um, what can
11 happen is that I'm just gonna give a, a, an example,
12 like maybe one agency realizes that, oh, within this
13 agency we are supporting so many veterans.

14 We then should, um, prioritize veterans in our
15 community, or maybe it should be veteran-designated,
16 this contract. So my goal is to be able to push for
17 those veteran nonprofits so they could be able to get
18 funding.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Okay, thank you, thank you.
20 Um, my follow-up, uh, post-9/11 veterans have the
21 same problem or, or it's worse?

YESENIA MATA: So when it comes to post-9, um, 11
veterans, what we are seeing is— oh, you mean on
numbers or—

COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Identifying themselves as veterans?

YESENIA MATA: Oh okay, um, I was going to talk about their needs, um, but we're noticing that it's across. It doesn't matter what generation they were part of, that what we are noticing is across. We are also just at times realizing that a veteran, uh, is, is self-identifying. They're so much older than the post-9/11 veterans, right?

So I, what is happening is that, uh, if we continue bringing awareness to this, even with the Vietnam veterans, many of them are, are, are dying, right, at a higher rate. And we need to do better to highlight them. Uh, to highlight their efforts, like reminding them of why it is important to self-identify, because if they don't self-identify, then that's an error. And what I'm noticing too, and someone that believes in, in history, uh, a lot, is that if we're not highlighting them, then that's a story that's gonna fade away. And what happens a lot when it comes to organizing and someone that's part of different movements is that we, if we can't organize in the present, if we don't learn from the past and I think when Vietnam veterans, when I spoke

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2 with many of them, they said, I wish there was a DVS
3 when I first came.

4 I wish there was much support as there is on the
5 ground with other veteran groups or that we were as
6 organized when I first came. And I think reminding
7 ourselves of that, that yes, we might, we, like, when
8 it comes to supporting the veteran community, there's
9 still more work to be done, but there has been so
10 many steps that have been taken. And again, 10 years
11 from now, 20 years from now, this will be even
12 better. So our goal is to go through history and
13 storytelling and make sure that we remember each era.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, before I turn to Council
16 Member De La Rosa, uh, I had an opportunity over the
17 last couple of days, uh, to start reviewing the
18 Veteran Advisory Board, uh, report. Have you had a
19 chance to look at that report? Do you have any
20 initial reaction to it? And do you have any idea
21 when the report may be made public so that some of
the folks in this room can have a look at it too?

YESENIA MATA: Um, I will have Nicole, um, from
my team elaborate at that. I know she has been
working heavily even before my time here at DVS with

the VAB, uh, with the VAB, and is, um, in, in close communication with them.

NICOLE ORLANDO: Thank you, Chair. As Commissioner mentioned, we've been working very closely with our partners and board members for the Veterans Advisory Board. We appreciate all their hard work that had went into putting this report together and the collaboration they provided along with us. This report will be public on our website. I believe it's actually been posted last night, so it will be up there now.

Um, we're really excited to share that there's a lot of new board members this time around that are having a lot of input and being able to participate with us. Our initial thoughts of this report is that we're very aligned in the sense that we're working closely with the board on some of the issues that were raised. Some of these issues we are seeing as an overlap in the post-9/11 veteran community as well as the veteran community in general with access to housing affordability, um, as well as data transparency that Commissioner has mentioned.

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2 So we're really looking forward to, um, our next
3 Veteran Advisory Board, which— meeting, which is next
4 week, and we're working closely with the board.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright, uh, I wanna at this
6 point acknowledge, uh, Council Member Jim Gennaro,
7 who is joining us via Zoom, and, uh, also want to,
8 uh, invite Council Member De La Rosa to offer any
9 questions.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Thank you, Chair, and
11 thank you, Commissioner and team, for being here. I
12 had two questions. The first one is around the VA
13 hospitals. I'm, um, um, you know, familiar with the
14 one in the Bronx that is closest to me, um, and I
15 know that obviously are federally run, but, uh, what
16 is the communication or, or collaboration— thank you,
17 um, between your office at the VA hospital in terms
18 of wraparound services and coordination of services?

19 YESENIA MATA: So when, um, I'm, I'm going to be
20 passing this question, um, soon to Donee, but, uh, as
21 DVS, we do work very closely with all the VA
hospitals and clinics because oftentimes um, they are
the ones that do provide that direct service that is
needed, especially in their own borough. So, um,
again, when people come to DVS or they call DVS, it

1 automatically, um, what we're noticing is that
2 they're looking for claims and benefits navigation,
3 and that's when we are able to not only send them
4 over to nonprofits, but as well to the VA. And, um,
5 again, we work very closely with them, and I will let
6 Donee go further in, elaborating on that.

7 DONEE SMALLS: Um, good morning, Chair, Members
8 of the Committee. I'm Donee, um, as a post-9/11
9 veteran as well as, um, ex- executive director of
10 Housing and Supportive Services. I work closely
11 with, um, the Harbor of Bronx VA to give wraparound
12 services to the veterans. A lot of them call. We
13 collaborate a lot with HUD-VASH and housing, um, but
14 we also refer for like mental health or any health
15 care services they need. Um, WomenCare, both, uh,
16 Harbor and the Bronx are very big on women's health.
17 And, um, so we direct them, you know, to them as far
18 as health care and their services there, because I go
19 to the one that's in your district, the Bronx, um, is
20 amazing.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: And is there any
coordination in terms- I know they can't, obviously
HIPAA laws and all of that, but is there any
coordination around sharing of like data, maybe like

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2 if there's like a percentage of women veterans that
3 need special assistance, like, is there any
4 coordination of—

5 DONEE SMALLS: We share data to a certain degree,
6 um, because of HIPAA.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Mhm.

8 DONEE SMALLS: We can't, but we have an MOU
9 between us where we can sh— share certain information
10 and data between the two agencies. So yes.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Great. And then my
12 final question, Commissioner, something I know you
13 and I care deeply about, um, is immigrants and
14 immigrants, um, service members. So I'm wondering,
15 what are some of the, uh, services that are
16 available?

17 YESENIA MATA: Thank you for that question. Um,
18 and, and, and just to give, uh, a bit on that, um,
19 oftentimes, um, green card veterans or green card
20 soldiers are left out of the conversation, um, or
21 children of immigrants that served. And, um, as
someone whose husband was a green card soldier and
did, even at that, did take time for him to obtain
his citizenship. Um, but he still served this
country because he loves this country. And, um, I, I

1
2 take this very personal. Um, so I am, um, working
3 very closely with, um, Assembly Member Catalina Cruz,
4 who has a bill that is on behalf of a soldier who
5 passed away in combat. And while he passed away, um,
6 his wife was in deportation proceedings.

7 Um, that's a reality and it's even happening
8 right now too. Um, prior to being here, I did
9 support— and that was a lot of my work— I was
10 supporting, um, soldiers whose parents were in the
11 detention center. And, um, I needed to help them
12 navigate not just the legal system, but also, um,
13 what was happening within their within, um, the unit
14 they belong to.

15 So I needed to wear both of my hats, the military
16 and advocacy one. But I say this because, um, I am
17 working closely with Assembly Member Catalina Cruz,
18 um, and ONA, the, uh, er, Office of New Americans,
19 because there's a particular support there to provide
20 service members with legal services. However, me
21 coming in here within my 2 months of being here,
there's still a lot of work to be done around that
because, um, this is a very niche, I would like to
say, uh, like, you have to have a lot of experience
around this.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, Commissioner, we have a couple more questions from some of my other colleagues. Um, two brief ones from me. I alluded to the lack of veteran representation in the New York City Council currently, and if you look at the VAB report, it talks about how post-9/11 veterans are less likely to be tied into legacy veteran networks and are often balancing careers and young families. What targeted recruitment strategies beyond just social media blasts will DVS implement to identify and directly engage this cohort for community boards and civic participation?

For example, uh, will you partner with employers, campuses, or transition programs to proactively recruit rather than relying on self-selection?

YESENIA MATA: Yes, I'm going to pass this to Nicole, but I, I'm, I'm glad that you asked that question because as I said, this is a very unique population, the post-9/11 veterans. We are at a point where, um, this is one of the most diverse generations um, one of the most educated generations too. Um, so the simple fact of us, um, at the moment of having these conversations is very important.

I know that, for example, Council, uh, Member, when you came to the roundtable, um, I know we were only able to touch up on mental health and we didn't even finish on the whole mental health situation, but there's, uh, it- there's different issues that need to be approached, differently.

Uh, but I know, as DVS, I'm still continue having these conversations. I'm still not done having the roundtables on the post-9/11, uh, veterans, um, which all of you will also be invited. But I'll pass on this question to Nicole.

NICOLE ORLANDO: Thank you, Chair. For us, it's also important to notice that we know our veterans

1
2 are in the community. So if they're not identifying
3 to us, we know that they're in each City Council
4 district. And I think we had this conversation
5 previously too where we do hold this data for which
6 veterans are in each council district.

7 So we encourage all Council Members to connect
8 with us to get that data of which veterans are in
9 their districts so that more of that direct community
10 building and outreach can be done.

11 I think additionally with us in that spirit of
12 partnership is that we're really excited to partner
13 with different organizations, as Council Member
14 Paladino said, that may not be veteran-oriented but
15 can help support veterans, especially when we're
16 thinking about in super local areas and on that
17 level.

18 I know that in the Veterans Advisory Report, and
19 there has been discourse around our part in promoting
20 candidate- veteran candidates and things of that
21 nature. And while that's something that we are not
exploring, what we do are in support of is veterans
increasing their civic engagement and really being
able to be involved on that local level.

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2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you. Um,
3 Commissioner, the- I, I don't have any interest in
4 using this forum, um, to push any partisan political
5 agenda or anything like that. So I'm not trying to
6 insert you in any sort of political controversy, uh,
7 but I do have to ask you about this, not only because
8 you're the Commissioner, but because you're a
9 post-9/11 veteran yourself.

10 Um, Mayor Adams last year, eh, announced that,
11 uh, this coming July there would be a ticker tape
12 parade. He called it the Homecoming of Heroes to
13 honor post-9/11 combat veterans and their families.
14 It was announced, uh, last week, uh, that Mayor
15 Mamdani is not gonna go forward with that.

16 I'm wondering if you could speak at all to what
17 your understanding was of the circumstances behind
18 that decision and what the Administration may be
19 considering in terms of honoring the post-9/11
20 veterans.

21 YESENIA MATA: Yes, thank you for that question,
Council Member. So as uh, as DVS, we have been
having various meetings. As I mentioned, I've had
close to 100 meetings and we are listening directly
from, uh, the veterans themselves. There have been

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2 various, um, conversations of different things that,
3 that, that have been said, whether it has been a
4 ruck, whether it's been a resource fair. So what we,
5 and what we then did was then convene the, a meeting,
6 uh, most recently as well about the, with the
7 post-9/11 veterans. And when it comes to that, we
8 are still in organizing the next steps of the ruck
9 and the, um, the resource fair because we, unlike the
10 previous Administration, we want to make sure that
11 the voices of veterans are included and they're the
12 ones that help us shape this and are part of the
13 coordination.

14 Um, so there's still a lot more conversation to
15 come on that, on how we're gonna do the ruck and the
16 resource fair. But just to give an example about the
17 ruck, the ruck is a universal per se, um, language
18 where it doesn't matter what branch you served. The
19 ruck is very universal for us that it's when we put,
20 uh, um, um, about whether it is 30 to 50 pounds in
21 our, in our, in our rucksack and, and would like to
maybe keep it simple, but like in March, and it's a
way for us to, to pay tribute to whomever it was that
we were, that, that we're honoring at that moment.

And again, this is going to require, um, uh, more conversations to have. Like, I know with the post-9/11 convening that we had, we had, uh, a conversation around that. Um, and, and veterans are, are letting us know, like, that you should change this or you should add this. But, um, with that, we are working very closely. I, I believe, um, um, with the Travis Foundation too, to be able to— they've done this ruck so many times, they, they've done the Brooklyn Bridge, and we're going to be working with them to get guidance from them on how to do this, this, this ruck.

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2 So, like, to your point, we've been convening
3 with veteran groups, and they are guiding us in this
4 process, and they're going to be part of every
5 conversation. And we also invite your offices too to
6 be part of this.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Well, thank you. I'm
8 definitely- I appreciate being included and look
9 forward to being part of the conversation. And, and
10 it's fine if you don't, but do you have an
11 understanding of why that decision was made to go in
12 a different direction? Is it a question of
13 resources? Is it a question of police, uh,
14 logistics? Is it something else?

15 YESENIA MATA: So when it comes to that, what has
16 been, um, as I started convening various veteran
17 groups, um, there has been a, a lot of conversations
18 that many veteran groups were not included in this
19 process. And that is what I do differently. I like
20 to include veterans. I like to hear from them. I
21 like them to be the ones leading this.

Um, and also when it does come to funding per se,
right? It's, um, it's, it's something that, that as
an agency, I'm really looking into as an agency and
to see, like, if, if this is something that can

1
2 continue every year, because when you plan something,
3 it's not just that it's just for this year, it's a
4 planification process.

5 So I do hope that with the support and, and the
6 guidance, I would like to say, of veterans
7 themselves, that perhaps next year is going to be
8 something else, right? But we need to start from the
9 bottom up, which is like, right now we're gathering
10 with veteran groups. They're letting us know what
11 works, what doesn't work, what they like, what they
12 don't like. And it's not always easy conversations,
13 but that's what part of organizing is. Like, you
14 have to have hard conversations and to make sure that
15 everybody feels part of this. And also, not only
16 will we be honoring those post-9/11 veterans, but we
17 are also going to take the opportunity to have
18 Vietnam veterans there present, because it— again, we
19 can't learn from our present or look forward to the
20 future if we don't know about our past.

21 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Council Member Paladino.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I'm switching topics on
23 you, uh, I want to, uh, delve into our VA hospitals.
24 And, uh, you know, we know the city budget is \$5

million for the veterans. We know that our VA hospitals are absolutely disgusting.

YESENIA MATA: Hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Uh, quite frankly, uh, I would like to know, and I would like to ask, uh, how about we do start to do some surprise checks. St. Albans in my borough comes to mind because we happen to know several veterans who had to go to St. Albans.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And, uh, I'd like to know if we could start to do some— be proactive. Out of that \$5 million, now we also have a Committee that is hospitals. Okay, called hospitals.

Well, how much of their budget actually goes towards our VA hospitals? Hmm, they're a mess. The food— this is— I'm reading right out of one of my vets. The food is gross. The veterans are neglected. No answers for families. Have to be pre-approved— for we, we as elected have to be pre-approved to visit. I cannot walk into a veterans hospital, which is total BS.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Absolute BS that I cannot walk in as a sitting elected who happens to serve on the Veterans Committee and ask to meet with— way I do at my homeless shelters.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I'm very much in touch. So the idea that I'm cut off from that is something that needs to be— tells me, what are you hiding? Because if I can't walk in and say, hello, how are you, ah, without being asked to leave immediately upon my arrival, I find that not only disrespectful, but totally lacking in any kind of confidence, like they're hiding something.

Also, these veterans should have access to EBT cards. The way the illegal immigrants in this country have. So I have a problem with that as well. Again, this is coming directly from a veteran. And again, it's gross about how they are treated. Elected officials should be able to walk in at any given times to do random checks.

So \$5 million, hospitals are a shambles, elected officials cannot just randomly drop in and say hello uh, and EBT cards. So let's keep those 3 on the front burner. That— I'm sorry to shift from such a

1 nice topic that you were having prior, but I really--
2 I just got this from him, and I really wanted this
3 addressed because again, like I said, the budget for
4 the veterans is disgraceful. I've been sitting on
5 this Committee, this will be 5 years. \$5 million
6 hasn't been increased, not by 1 cent. We have
7 Committees here that are-- it's a Hospitals Committee.
8 What else? What, what's the Committee called?
9 Hospitals and General Welfare? General Welfare? You
10 would know. Just Hospitals, flat out Hospitals. So
11 how much out of the Hospitals Committee actually goes
12 to are veterans hospitals.

13 YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And I wanna be allowed
15 in anytime I wanna go. And I think they should be
16 able to be entitled to EBT cards. That's all. Thank
17 you.

18 YESDEDNIA MATA: Thank you, Councilwoman, for
19 that question because, um, even though the VA is
20 handled at a federal level, I know that we do have
21 good relationships with the VA and that is something
unique that we're doing now, um, er, under my
leadership is that I'm trying to build, at least open
up that line of communication. And I know that part

of the organizing per se that we would like to do is begin having meetings with the VA directly. And, and this is where we would like to invite you, and so to begin having these conversations.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And on a personal note, my father died in 1961. He died in a VA hospital because my mother could not afford had any other hospitalization for my dad. So he died, like I said, up in the Bronx in, in the VA hospital. So that was many, many, many, many years ago, but it's as current today, mhm, as it was in 1961. This just came to me as I'm— I lost my dad in the VA hospital.

YESENIA MATA: I'm so sorry for that, uh, Councilwoman, and, and, and, and with that, um, that's why we want to make sure that we have good relationships. And I'm— and I can have a follow-up, uh, conversation with you on that, on how we are trying to also, um, team up with the VA hospital. And there's a whole other conversation that we're having with them, but we would like to bring you in that conversation and also, um, further, um, emphasize that what we can do collectively is make sure that— the veterans know the alternative that they have if they're not supported at the—

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: City Hall has a Hospitals Committee. We- Council, has a Hospitals Committee.

YESENIA MATA: Mhm.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I think you should start there. And let's find out in their line item for the new budget, \$127 billion. That's a lot of money. Let's find out how much of that \$127 billion that's being allotted to the Hospitals Committee is actually gonna go toward the heroes of this country. I, I'm dead serious about that. Dead, dead serious about that. Thank you.

YESENIA MATA: Thank you. Thank you, Councilwoman and the next- to finalize this, we are trying to build that strong relationship with the Commissioner from DOHMH um, because, um, we would like to have these conversations with them on how can alternatively they can support veterans if the VA is not doing that.

So that's another, um, uh, meeting that we're gonna have with the second meeting that we're gonna have with the Commissioner from DOHMH.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, thank you, Council Member, for your family service as well. Uh,

1 Commissioner, you've given us a lot to think about in
2 your testimony, and, uh, I think one of the things
3 that was most readily apparent is that we should be
4 listening to the voices of veterans, which we're—
5 we'll, we'll do in a moment. Uh, is there anything
6 else you want to leave us with?

7 YESENIA MATA: I just want to reassure you that
8 as the new Commissioner coming in within my 2 months
9 Uh, we— I am looking very deep into all the data. We
10 are currently even submitting a report, uh, a
11 particular report on disability that had not been
12 submitted for the last 3 years, just so you know.
13 And within my 2 months, we're submitting it and we're
14 convening a roundtable with disability advocates so
15 they could also look at this report and tell us what
16 is wrong or what do we need to change. And also to,
17 um, hold, hold me as an agency accountable, like,
18 well, how is it that they're going to be holding me
19 accountable? I'm all about accountability. So I just
20 want you to know that what we are doing within my
21 agency, like, within my 2 months, again, we are
submitting— even, I'm even looking through what
reports haven't been submitted. I just want to be
transparent about that. So I am making sure that we

1 are up to date. I am also making sure that with
2 Local Law 37, that that's fully implemented. And
3 also because I want to make sure that the veteran
4 groups here have the most accurate data so they could
5 advocate for their nonprofit and that they're fully
6 supported when it comes to Local Law 37, when they're
7 asking for contracts. And I, I, I always tell my
8 team that we need to be respectful to all the
9 veterans that are here. So we are-- we stay, um, and
10 listen to each one of them. So I just want-- I want
11 them to know that we're also listening and being
12 fully supportive of them.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: When, when I talked
14 about the Hospitals Committee, one way you may be
15 able to finagle yourself around a little bit is look
16 at all our different Committees that we have. And
17 why not delve into the so many-- there's how many
18 Committees in the City Council? How many that could
19 actually assist the veterans? Something you should
20 look into because funding does not necessarily have
21 to just be the one allotted amount of \$5 million.
There's other pots that you should be able to dip
into in order to get your money.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yeah, I, I think that's a great point. If you look at every Committee, which one doesn't have something to do with veterans, you know, General Welfare, Finance, even Criminal Justice. Absolutely.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: There's so many ways. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you Commissioner. Uh, thank you, everybody. Appreciate your help.

PANEL: Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright, uh, we are now going to open the hearing for public testimony. I want to remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times.

As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times. Uh, the witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. Uh, no video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant-at-Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

1
2 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill
3 out an appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms and
4 wait to be recognized.

5 When recognized, you'll have 3 minutes to speak
6 on today's hearing topic, Serving Post-9/11 Veterans.
7 We'll hear all in-person testimony first and then
8 turn to testimony on Zoom.

9 Uh, the members of this Committee may ask you a
10 question or two, uh, but if we don't, that doesn't
11 mean we're not interested. Would trust me when I
12 tell you we're paying very, very close attention to
13 what everybody's saying.

14 If you have a written statement or additional
15 written testimony you wish to submit for the record,
16 please provide a copy of that testimony to the
17 Sergeant-at-Arms.

18 Alright, I will now call the first panel. When
19 you hear your name, come on up. Uh, I will welcome
20 Joseph Wein, Jenny Bucove, Christina Brown Fisher and
21 Coco Culhane, come on down.

And if, uh, I do mispronounce anyone's name,
please correct me. Alright, uh, thank you. Uh,
begin with Mr. Wein, who, uh, in addition to being a
Marine veteran, is also, uh, uh, somebody that I've

1 had the privilege of knowing personally and who
2 gifted me this, um, embassy, uh, panel from the U.S.
3 Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq when he was serving there,
4 and it's, uh, my privilege to wear it.

5 Uh, so thank you, Mr. Wein.

6 JOSEPH WEIN: Thank you. Uh, good, good morning,
7 everybody. It's a pleasure to be here. It's a
8 pleasure to be back in this room. Uh, as you'll hear
9 in my statement, I worked in the Council many years
10 ago before I was called back to work. Alright, by
11 work I mean government work, which— this is
12 government work.

13 But good, good morning, Frank, Chairman, uh, and
14 Members of the, uh, Council. It's a pleasure to be
15 here. So I'm proud to say that I'm a native New
16 Yorker, right? Born and raised here. I am equally
17 proud to be a third-generation Marine, combat veteran
18 Marine. And I also like to say that I come from a
19 family of immigrants from Cuba and Italy. Both sides
20 of my family have served in the military since 1914,
21 and that tradition continues today.

My nephew is a pilot in the Navy, but I cannot
disclose where he is or what type of plane he flies.
But I assure you he is in harm's way. Alright, I

1 joined the Marine Corps immediately after high
2 school, and I served for 4 years on active duty.
3 During that time, I was deployed to the First Gulf
4 War, where I was a scout with the now Second Light
5 Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. I later deployed
6 with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, a special
7 operations capable force, um, which supported
8 Operation Provide Promise in the former Republic of
9 Yugoslavia. And I trained with our partner nations
across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

10 After returning to New York City, I worked for
11 Council Member Jay O'Donovan, which I don't know if
12 anybody up here remembers him, but he was the first
13 Vietnam vet elected to the Council. Uh, I later ran
14 for City Council myself in the 50th District, and as
15 fate would have it, my primary day was September
16 11th, 2001. Alright, after, uh, obviously, uh, that
17 kind of threw a wrench into my campaign. I did not
18 win, but I went on to work down at Ground Zero for
19 about a year. Um, after assisting down at Ground
20 Zero, I returned to service with the US Department of
21 State's High Protection Office— High Threat
Protection Office.

1
2 Uh, I was assigned to the Baghdad, ah, office
3 protecting, uh, diplomatic personnel during Operation
4 Iraqi Freedom. I served there in Iraq from 2005 to
5 2008, continuous service, coming home occasionally
6 for leave. I later was tasked to work with the
7 USAID, the, and the State Department Security Service
8 again in Afghanistan, where I was there in 2009 and
9 2010.

10 Upon returning to the United States, I supported,
11 uh, domestic emergency responses and continued, uh,
12 security and leadership roles. Uh, my current role
13 is security sensitive, so I will not give you any
14 specific details of what I do now or who I work for.
15 However, I want to emphasize that the opinions,
16 experience, and perspectives that I share to you
17 today are my own, shaped, and mine alone, are shaped
18 over 55 years of life and service.

19 I share this background to make the point clear:
20 veterans have earned access to the care and support
21 they were promised. The transition from military to
civilian life is not an easy one. It's more
difficult for others than some alright, and access to
the Department of Veterans Affairs and Services is a
critical part of that trend- transition.

1
2 Ensuring timely, consistent, and equitable access
3 to the VA services is not just a policy issue, it's a
4 matter of responsibilities. And knowing that we have
5 the full trust and support of our representatives is
6 essential to helping make that transition. Veterans
7 should not have to struggle to receive the care they
8 need after a lifetime of service. And I say lifetime
9 because if you were in Iraq for 2 years or Vietnam
10 for a year, it's a lifetime of service. Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, Joe, I have 2 quick
12 questions for you before we go to the other
13 panelists. Uh, I appreciate your testimony today,
14 and you, you have such a unique perspective having
15 served alongside both pre-9/11 and post-9/11
16 veterans. From your perspective, what's the biggest
17 difference in the challenges they face when they come
18 home?

19 JOSEPH WEIN: So, um, definitely some of the same
20 things. I'd say post-Gulf War, the Gulf War veterans
21 got little credit for doing anything because the
media portrayed it as this bloodless, easygoing— we
dropped a few laser bombs and everybody surrendered.
And I could tell you that was not the case.

1
2 Maybe some units, as in any combat -deployment or
3 any deployment and individuals- some people maybe
4 didn't do anything. Some people were in Riyadh the
5 whole time driving a bus, which I literally know a
6 guy who did that. Important job. I said, there's-
all jobs are important.

7 I was in a reconnaissance unit that was up along
8 the Kuwaiti border, months so far north we were out
9 of the artillery fan, meaning we had no support. So
10 when we did get attacked and we were counter with
11 another Iraqi counter-reconnaissance unit, you know,
it was tough.

12 So you came home and we didn't get any credit at
13 all. I mean, there were even sometimes at the VA
14 hospital where we were kind of rejected a little bit.
15 Post-9/11, there was an initial response of open
16 arms, right? But then as the war dragged on, and as
17 all wars that last a long time become political,
18 right? It's, oh yeah, you guys did a great job, but
19 you know, look who you're fighting for. I mean, and,
20 and I'm explaining it wrong, but so I say some of the
21 struggles are being accepted as a veteran, right?
And, and having other people say, hey, look at it,
this is hard and there's a lot of sacrifice. And I

1 think that one of the things that people don't
2 understand about the last 20-plus years, only 1% of
3 the population served, right? So I have friends of
4 mine that just wrapped up their 25-year career, and I
5 have a friend of mine, I was in the Marines with him,
6 he then worked with us in the State Department and
7 other agencies, went into Army Special Forces, spent
8 21 years there, and was deployed 16 of 21 years. And
9 he comes home and really nobody wants to deal with,
10 with, with you. Um, and once again, like I said,
11 it's, it's open arms from some folks, complete
12 rejection from other folks, and the struggle at the
13 VA.

14 And I wanna make it clear, a lot of people that
15 work-- that I've dealt with at the VA centers, a
16 hospital themselves, they greet you well and they try
17 to help you out. It's when it elevates to that is
18 the problem. I've literally been told, well, you
19 were in the first Gulf War, Joe, that wasn't a real
20 war. I mean, I was literally told that one time.
21 And then another time I was told, um, well, you make
enough money and you work, what do you need benefits
for?

1
2 I said, I'm not even necessarily want benefits, I
3 want my treatment. I was hurt in the Marines and I
4 want the military to continue my treatment, which I
5 have circumstances now that I'm trying to get fixed,
6 and it's just, you know, you're rejected from it.

7 So I don't know if it's the same, if that
8 answered the quest- question or not, but it's kind
9 of- there's a lot of- this stuff is not yes and no.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Let me, uh, end with this,
11 uh, given your experience in both government and the
12 private sector, what's one practical thing New York
13 City could do right now that you think would make a
14 real difference to post-9/11 veterans?

15 JOSEPH WEIN: Um, so I think we can take a
16 lesson. I love New York. I may live across the
17 river now, right? But I will say, uh, New York- and
18 I've argued with people literally around the world
19 with this- it's the greatest place in the world,
20 right? But when you go to other states like Florida,
21 or I lived in Texas for a while for work, they let
you know everything that's available to you, and they
proactively try to help you out. For Texas example,
if you're a Texas resident, not like I went there to
work and I'm a veteran and I moved there. If you're

1 a Texas citizen, as they say, right, a state, and you
2 go there and you- I don't remember if you were a
3 combat veteran, I think it was- any state school is
4 free, 100%. This is outside of your VA stuff, right?
5 So if I want to go to A&M, right, it's free.

6 If I want to go- I think Louisiana has a similar
7 thing- if I want to go to LSU- they pay most of the
8 bill. They pick it up. I went, I served, I
9 deployed. It's on them. And this is outside of your
10 GI Bill.

11 So I think New York needs to, as you said before,
12 uh, uh, you know, we need to reallocate some funds.
13 Everybody wants their stuff funded, but when 99% of
14 the population of the United States is leaning on the
15 1%, and they've been leaning on the 1% for over 20
16 years- in fact, after the withdrawal from
17 Afghanistan, the enlistment rate dropped to 0.5%.
18 And, and I know a lot of people don't want to
19 acknowledge this right now. And like I said, this
20 comes- you like the President, you don't like the
21 President, you like the Mayor, you like the City
Council, you don't- it doesn't matter. These people,
veterans, Vietnam veterans- you know, everyone
forgets a lot of Vietnam veterans volunteered to go.

They made the call, right? And think about that.

99% of the population does not serve or has no intention of serving, doesn't go in the military. 1% serves. So I would say we could take an example from places like Florida and Texas and proactively say, hey, if you served and— or you're a combat veteran or whatever the case is, CUNY's free. It used to be that way.

So if we can find money for all these other special things, you can find money for the 1% of the people who make a lifetime commitment because it doesn't end. And any veteran in here will tell you it doesn't end, right? You deployed once, you're in the military for 2 years, it is with you the rest of your life.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, thank you, Joe, for your service and for your testimony. And I'll just state for the record that everybody knows there's no one that dislikes the City Council. Let's be very clear.

JOSEPH WEIN: I adore the City Council. I tried to get back into it, but, you know, it is what it is.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I wanna to welcome, uh, wanna welcome, uh, Jenny, uh, Bucove, who is with Gallup NYC and, uh, comes from Howard Beach.

JENNIE BUCOVE: Uh, good morning, Council Members and Chair. Um, I'm Jenny Bucove. I'm the Executive Director of Gallup NYC, and we're New York City's largest therapeutic equine-based nonprofit, and we're based in Queens.

At its core, Gallup NYC exists to provide accessible therapeutic experiences with horses for all New Yorkers and we have people come to us from all 5 boroughs. This includes people with physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges. And for many of our riders, this is the first time they've been near a horse, let alone ridden one. And it's often the only way that they would be able to have that access through us.

Each week we serve over 400 New Yorkers, including approximately 40 veterans and their family members, I'm proud to say, through riding and unmounted programs. And we're also joined by 100 volunteers each week who support this work. Everyone that comes to us receives a subsidy. Nobody is turned away because of cost.

Our veterans programs provide hand-on horse care and riding instruction and opportunities to build connection and community in a setting that feels

1 comfortable and non-clinical and fun, frankly. We
2 partner directly with the VA New York Harbor Health
3 Care Systems, serving veterans from both the St.
4 Albans and Brooklyn campuses each month. And we are
5 expanding our work through the Veterans Family
6 Program that was initially funded through Dwyer.
7 Thank you for that.

8 Um, which brings veterans and their children
9 together in a fun program which strengthens the ties
10 in the families, rebuilds connections, but also
11 provides a community of people and families that have
12 gone through similar experiences. And we're
13 currently working with, um, the group at Columbia
14 University that developed the Man O' War protocol for
15 PTSD treatment, and we're pulling their best
16 practices into our curriculum as well.

17 As one participant shared, as a veteran with no
18 prior horse experience, Gallop NYC restored a sense
19 of camaraderie that was missing from civilian life.
20 The relationships with the horses and instructors
21 have been a powerful source of healing for my
anxiety, depression, and trauma-related challenges.
And we're requesting your support in several areas.
\$150,000 in DVS funding to sustain and expand our

1 veterans programs, which we are provided free to all
2 participants. Demand continues to grow, particularly
3 as we work more closely with the VA partnerships.

4 Secondly, we are asking for capital funding for
5 an indoor arena, including \$250,000 from the Council
6 as part of a broader funding- public funding request.
7 Our programs are canceled when it's snowing, it's
8 raining, or too hot, which is really difficult for
9 our families. It interrupts our services.

10 Um, and by building this indoor arena, it will
11 allow us to build an indoor arena that will ensure
12 consistency. Gallup NYC is a cost-effective,
13 high-impact model that improves mental health,
14 strengthens family, and expands access to care
15 outside of traditional clinical settings.

16 Thank you very much for your support and for the
17 opportunity to testify.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And, um, is there a location
19 for that indoor arena as of yet?

20 JENNIE BUVOVE: Yes, there is. It's at our, at
21 Sunrise in, at our facility in Queens.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And, uh, obviously Gallup
NYC seems like it's doing really unique work with
veterans. From what you've seen so far, what

specific outcomes, if any, are you seeing for post-9/11 veterans, and how can the city help scale that impact?

JENNIE BUCOVE: What we find at Gallup is that our— working with us helps people that traditional therapies don't often help, sometimes can't reach. So an obvious one for veterans is PTSD. And so when you come and talk to some of our veterans, they'll tell you that they were very— and we see it, and it's one of the reasons that we've been so successful for the, with the VA, because they see the results that some people come to us and they're very closed off and working with us and working with our horses in particular really opens them up in a way that other therapies don't. That's just one example.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Um, and also with Gallup NYC, we're lucky enough to be joined by Christina Brown Fisher. Go ahead.

CHRISTINA BROWN FISHER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, City Council members. My name is Christina Brown Fisher. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today on behalf of Gallup NYC and the veterans it serves.

1
2 When you walk into the Manhattan campus of the
3 Department of Veteran Affairs New York Harbor Health
4 Care System on 23rd Street and 1st Avenue, there's a
5 quote on the wall from George Washington that says,
6 the willingness with which our young people are
7 likely to serve in any war shall be directly
8 proportional to how they perceive the veterans of
9 earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their
10 nation.

11 I am one of those veterans. I served 4 years on
12 active duty in the Air Force. I was an information
13 specialist, and I made a successful transition to
14 television news. I am an Emmy Award-winning
15 journalist, a former anchor and correspondent for
16 MSNBC and NBC News. My work has appeared in The New
17 York Times, HuffPost, and other publications. But my
18 journey with horses did not begin as recreation. It
19 began during neurorehabilitation at a VA medical
20 center in Virginia. Riding was introduced as part of
21 my recovery, and what started as therapy became
something much more. It became a path back to
myself.

When I first began riding, I needed both a side
walker and a lead walker just to stay balanced, just

1 to stay safe. I proudly ride independently now.
2 That's because of Gallup NYC. That progress didn't
3 just happen physically. It rebuilt confidence,
4 independence, and a sense of self that had been
5 shaken.

6 My son began riding at Gallup NYC in 2021. It's
7 become something we share, something that strengthens
8 our connection in a way that's hard to replicate
9 elsewhere. And while I have gained independence, my
10 8-year-old, who requires significant support, always
11 finds it at Gallup. Sometimes that support looks
12 like riding, but other times it's groundwork. It's
13 learning how to tack, how to groom, and how to feed
14 the horses. Those moments matter just as much.
15 There are lessons being learned both in and out of
16 the saddle, lessons such as patience, responsibility,
17 trust, and confidence that simply cannot be
18 replicated in any traditional setting.

19 There is something uniquely powerful about being
20 around these animals, they demand presence. They
21 respond to calm and consistency. And for veterans,
especially those dealing with trauma, injury, or the
invisible wounds of service, that environment creates

1
2 a kind of peace that is very hard to find elsewhere,
3 particularly in New York City.

4 On horseback, the noise quiets, the stress eases,
5 and over time, something important returns:
6 confidence, pride and a renewed sense of capability.
7 Programs like Gallup NYC provide something that
8 traditional clinical settings often simply cannot.
9 They offer healing without stigma. They create space
10 not just for individual growth, but for family
11 connection as well.

12 I'm here today to ask you to recognize the value
13 of that work and to support it, not as a luxury, but
14 as a meaningful and effective complement to the care
15 veterans need and deserve. If we want future
16 generations to step forward and to serve, we have to
17 show now clearly and consistently that we take care
18 of those who already have. Thank you for your time
19 and for your commitment to veterans.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, thank you for your
21 service, uh, to the Air Force. Thank you for your
testimony today. Um, you've said programs like
therapeutic riding work in part because I, I think
the phrase you used and you put it brilliantly, they
offered, uh, healing without stigma, right?

1
2 Um, how can the city better integrate and support
3 these kinds of complementary therapies so more
4 veterans feel comfortable taking that first step
5 towards getting help? I think it kind of goes to
6 what Mr. Wein, uh, was saying about, um, outreach
7 from the city's part, from DVS's part. And obviously
8 there's a lot of other potential services that the
9 city could fund as, uh, Council Member Paladino
10 alluded to, veterans get a very, very small, small
11 slice of the \$120 billion budget pie, \$127 billion.
12 Um, what do you think the city can do to help
13 veterans that might benefit from programs like Gallup
14 NYC find them and discover them?

12 CHRISTINA BROWN FISHER: I think one of the most
13 critical areas would be awareness and communication.
14 Uh, currently a lot of the services that veterans,
15 uh, know about that are outside of the clinical
16 setting. They are typically, uh, being informed
17 about those services through the Department of
18 Veterans Affairs Medical Center. But as we've heard
19 today, uh, not everyone is in the VA Medical Center
20 pipeline.

20 So therefore, you have to get creative, um, and
21 maybe even perhaps employ mandates on various

1 agencies in terms of what they are doing outside of
2 the VA Medical Center or outside of government
3 agencies in order to make veterans aware. There are
4 countless numbers of nonprofit organizations, uh,
5 there are organizations at academic institutions, uh,
6 even private institutions that might have a veterans
7 service-oriented, uh, organization or group. And I
8 think outreach utilizing, uh, those systems would be
very very helpful.

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Council Member Paladino.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Uh, where- your
11 program takes place, in what park?

12 CHRISTINA BROWN FISHER: In Queens?

13 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I know in Queens, but
14 what particular park in Queens?

15 CHRISTINA BROWN FISHER: Uh, Gemini Fields.
16 Gemini Fields.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Okay. We also have in
18 City Council a Parks Department that has probably one
19 of the largest budgets, I think \$600 million. You
20 guys are looking for how much?

21 CHRISTINA BROWN FISHER: Um, we are looking for
\$120,000 for the veterans.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Well, there you go. So
3 with our measly breadcrumbs that we get, I suggest we
4 start to take up- I'm dead serious about all of this.
5 We go to park- we go to Parks and we go to Parks and
6 we ask Parks for money for this terrific program that
you are able to take a part of.

7 Until they increase the City Council budget for
8 the veterans, for the heroes of this country, whether
9 you're passed on and you're members of family or you
10 are active or you are in the reserve, you are
entitled to what you are entitled to.

11 Everybody comes here on bended knee and, and
12 begging for funds when this is what you are entitled
13 for, entitled to. You served the greatest country in
14 the world. You put your lives on the line. Okay,
enough is enough.

15 Now, you talked about other states, Virginia,
16 Texas, all of this. Get political. Where is our
17 state in helping you? Our city, though we're gonna
18 blow \$127 billion on God knows what, you're left here
19 begging for services that you are deserving of. So
20 let's take it to the state level as well as the City
21 Council level. There is more than one way to skin a

1 cat. I've been in business a long time and I know
2 how to think outside the box.

3 I advise all of you to start to demand, not ask
4 on bended knee and figure this out because enough is
5 enough. Thank you very much.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you. And we're also
7 hoping that Council Member Paladino won't be so
8 reserved and muted with her opinions going forward.
9 I, I- we love it, we love it. Everybody should be.
10 Alright, uh, wanna welcome- thank you, uh, wanna
11 welcome from the, uh, Veteran Advocacy Project, uh,
12 Coco Culhane, who, um, I've said when she's testified
13 previously that Veterans are lucky to have her as an
14 advocate. I can tell you, as someone that's been
15 briefed by her and is fully aware of her expertise,
16 that, uh, this- the commit- the Chair of this
17 Committee is very lucky to have her as a resource.
18 Thank you, Ms. Culhane.

19 COCO CULHANE: You're too kind. Uh, I'm going to
20 speak very briefly because I'm not a post-9/11
21 veteran. I think, uh, it's so terrific to have
people here, and, and we need to listen to veterans
themselves. Um, I think the Commissioner pointed out
this is the most educated, most successful um, most

1
2 diverse generation, but it's also the most isolated
3 as we just heard. Um, less than half a percent
4 served. And I think in New York City, that problem
5 is really compounded by the fact that we're not a
6 military town. Most of our vets are reserve and
guard and have an entirely different experience.

7 The last 20 years of war has seen unprecedented
8 use of things like individual augmentees, all these
9 things that can make transition even more difficult.
10 Um, and then I think you also have the fact that
11 they're coming back to a city that, you know,
12 everyone in this room is involved in veterans' work
13 communities. It's their lives. And I think it's
14 easy to sometimes forget how— or maybe it's not easy,
15 but the rest of the city doesn't seem to care.

16 I mean, there's just so little attention paid to
17 veterans' issues. Um, and so I think it's important
18 that the communication, the outreach, all of that
19 that is— that's our duty here, to make sure that
20 people don't feel isolated, don't get lost.

21 Um, you know, there— I think in 2012, there were
like a few months when, like, veterans were sort of
the hot topic, and there were outreach campaigns and
things like that. We need to do that. We need to

1
2 get back to saying out loud that we appreciate
3 service and not making it political. Um, you know, I
4 think it's unfortunate that there's a history of
5 politicizing these things and I think right now
6 there's even more danger in terms of people
expressing that they don't agree with foreign policy.

7 An 18-year-old at Fort Drum has nothing to do
8 with that, and we cannot, um, lapse in our duty and
9 our obligation to fill the gaps for the services.
10 Um, you know, the highest rates of PTSD, brain
11 injury, also of less than honorable discharges, which
12 means they're not getting access to the VA. Um,
after 1980, you have to have served a certain, you
know, 24 continuous months.

13 So there are challenges that are unique to this
14 generation, and, and it is our obligation to, to step
15 up and serve them. Um, and I also just wanted to say
16 that we support the bill, Intro, uh, 0488. Um, HPD
17 has a history of not always doing the best with
18 veterans. Um, in 2014, uh, they rewrote the
19 regulation so that veterans preference had been
20 number 2, and number 4 was listed as everyone else in
21 the lottery.

1
2 So without going into much detail, they rewrote
3 the regulation so that the veterans preference was
4 applied after the lottery. If you have 10,000 people
5 applying to a building, they pull 300, 500, and then
6 if you're lucky enough to have been in that, then you
get the veterans preference.

7 We can't, you know, that's been changed but at
8 least every year— it's not every year, every few
9 years it seems like they tweak things, um, you know,
10 and then they frame it as this positive thing. So in
2014 it was framed as, but we're— surviving spouses
are now included.

11 Well, that was a 2010 state law and they were
12 finally updating the New York City regulations. So
13 it's just another area where we need to be aware of
14 what we're really doing and how we're treating those
15 who serve for us. Thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, uh, Miss Culhane.
17 All right, at this point, I want to thank all four of
18 you for your testimony. I appreciate it. And I'll
19 call up our next panel, uh, Lieutenant G. Rieco Diaz,
20 uh, Mike Munoz, and Ricardo Garcia, and finally
21 Douglas Brewsher. And again, if I mispronounce your
name, please correct me when you testify. And if

1 anyone has copies of, uh, their testimony, they can
2 give it to the Sergeant of Arms. He'll, uh,
3 distribute it. If you don't have copies, that's okay
4 too. Uh, we'll review the transcript and share them
5 with the Committee. Uh, we'll begin with Lieutenant
6 Diaz when you're ready.

7 Hello and, uh, just turn on your microphone if
8 you can, sir. Thank you.

9 LIEUTENANT G RIECO DIAZ: Am I on? Okay.
10 Alright, good morning, Chairperson and, uh, members
11 of the City Council. My name is— as it was said, I'm
12 Lieutenant G. Rieco Diaz. I have served 27 years in
13 the United States military and 35 years as a
14 paramedic and a New York City fire officer with the
15 FDNY.

16 I now serve as District Director and President of
17 the American Legion Riders for the Bronx County Post
18 620, and I previously served at the— as President of
19 the FDNY Disaster Assistance Response Team with the
20 American Red Cross.

21 My life has been dedicated to running into
emergencies this city and this nation faced. Today I
am here because we are facing an emergency of a

different kind, one of priorities and of civil responsibility.

In recent weeks, New York City has withdrawn from several major commemorative events: the 250th anniversary of the United States, the 25th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, and the long-promised ticker tape parade honoring veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

These decisions have deeply affected the veteran community. For those of us who responded on September 11th, this is not symbolic. I lost more than 4- 60 friends and brothers that day among the 343 you lost, and we have lost hundreds more since due to 9/11-related illnesses. These anniversaries are sacred. They are part of this city's moral fabric.

We have been told that the upcoming FIFA World Cup has strained city resources. No one disputes the scale of that event, but many veterans and families concerned that a global sporting event appears to have taken precedence over solemn national milestones and long-promised recognition. I understand man-resource management. I lived it in uniform and emergency responses.

Veterans, Gold Star families, and first responders are asking a simple question: if New York City can host the world, why can it not honor its own? It is not only about veterans, it's about the message we send to the next generation. A city, a city that celebrates athletes but sidelines instead of service members, risks teaching young people that valor on a playing field matters more than valor on a battlefield.

That cannot be the legacy of New York City. I respectfully urge this Council to take decisive action: reinstate and schedule the ticker tape parade honoring OIF and OEF veterans, ensure full planning and support for the 250th anniversary of the United States, affirm the city's commitment to properly commemorating the 25th anniversary of September 11th.

1
2 In the fire service, we say never forget. In the
3 military, we say leave no one behind. These are not
4 slogans, they are principles. New York City has
5 always led this nation in resilience, patriotism, and
6 remembrance. This is a moment to uphold that legacy.
7 I urge the City Council to act, restore these
8 commitments, and ensure this city continues to stand
9 for those who have always who stood for it. Thank
10 you for the opportunity to testify.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, uh, Lieutenant
12 Diaz. Beyond reinstating the parade, for which you
13 made a very powerful case, what does doing it right
14 look like from your perspective, from your timeline,
15 and from the scope of city government? What, what
16 should we be doing?

17 LIEUTENANT G RIECO DIAZ: The, the, the
18 recognition— small things mean a lot. We did— little
19 things mean a lot. So just the fact that you're
20 going to acknowledge veterans, as it's been testified
21 here already that veterans in New York City are
22 ignored. Basically, we're, we're a small fraction of
23 the population, and it's very hard for us to be
24 recognized many times, uh, especially, uh, especially
25 back in the day, you know, veterans that, that

1 stepped up and served as reservists were not
2 respected because they're not real soldiers. But
3 when 9/11 proved that was a completely different
4 program, all reservists were called to the front line
5 and served actively and proudly.

6 So to, to change the, the, the, the, the
7 recognition of what veterans do for the city and for
8 what we do to our country, a small thing like
9 acknowledging the contributions that not only
10 veterans did but the children of those veterans that
11 were mentioned today, the wives that were left
12 behind.

13 It was mentioned that veterans didn't get to go
14 to school, and other states are honoring that, at
15 least giving those veterans a chance to go back
16 school and finish their education. A lot of our
17 veterans' education was interrupted because they had
18 to go deploy and they couldn't finish school.

19 So these are the things that can be done to
20 recognize in the Ticket Take Parade or other
21 recognition programs. Bring it out to the light.
Let people know what we've done.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, and for your
testimony and for your service. Alright, uh, we will

1
2 hear from, uh, Mike Munoz. And please, if I said
3 your name incorrectly, please correct me.

4 MIKE MUNOZ: It's correct, it's correct,
5 Chairman. Um, good morning, Chairman Morano and
6 Members of the Committee. My name is Mike Munoz and
7 I'm an Army veteran and Commander of American Legion
8 Post 917 here in Lower Manhattan, where I work with
9 veterans who face real housing challenges. I am also
a resident of a Mitchell-Lama building and I strongly
support Intro 488.

10 Housing stability is one of the most important
11 factors in helping veterans transition successfully
12 to civilian life. Programs like Mitchell Lama
13 provide critical affordable housing, and veterans
14 preference policies exist to recognize the sacrifice
15 made by those who served. But a preference policy
16 only works if it is, it is transparent and
17 accountable. This legislation requires annual
18 reporting, clear data on how many veterans apply, how
19 many are selected, and how the system is monitored.
20 That transparency allows leaders to identify gaps,
21 correct problems, and ensure veterans are not
unintentionally left behind. Veterans answered the
call to serve our country. Many served far from home

1
2 so our communities here could remain safe and secure.
3 I respectfully, respectfully urge the Committee to
4 support Intro 488. Thank you for your time and
5 consideration.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Munoz and as
7 a sponsor of this bill, I could tell you I wish every
8 bill I sponsored had an advocate as effective and as
9 forceful as you are to speak on its behalf.

10 Uh, let me ask you though, if we pass this bill
11 tomorrow, what's the one problem in the current
12 Mitchell Lama veteran preference system that you'd
13 want fixed first? The Commissioner alluded to that
14 they wanna tweak this bill and help the Council make
15 it even better. What do you think that would look
16 like?

17 And so in my opinion, um, a lot of Mitchell Lama
18 buildings have many applicants. So, hmm, once they
19 have a certain amount of applicants, they close their
20 applications. But once they - once all veterans are
21 called up from the application- from those
22 applications, and the list still remains closed.

23 So in my opinion, the- any building who has zero
24 veterans on their waiting list should open for
25 veterans to apply for those buildings.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Makes sense. Thank you, sir. Uh, at this point, I want to welcome, uh, Ricardo Garcia, also of the American Legion in the Bronx.

RICARDO GARCIA: Okay, here we go. Does it work?

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: There you go, just keep it close.

RICARDO GARCIA: Thank you, Chairman Frank Morano. Uh, thank you, Council Member Wong, um, and, uh, to all others that are in attendance. Um, my name is Ricardo Garcia. I'm retired United States Army. 25 years I served between active duty, reserve, and National Guard as a senior enlisted. Um, I'm also a 9/11 World Trade Center responder, uh, um, in the military capacity. I was there from day one, from the first plane that hit till the towers fell, uh, into the recovery operations thereafter.

Uh, with that being said, um, I want to kind of draw your attention to the packets that I provided you all. Um, if anybody needs an extra packet, I have some in the back there. Um, I'm gonna start off with a real quick quote, um, by John F. Kennedy. I put multiple there so you guys could use it for other military events, so to help you guys out.

1
2 Um, as we express our gratitude, we must never
3 forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter
4 words but to live them; from JFK. I'm gonna draw
5 your attention now to this public statement from the
6 American Legion, which was authorized by our state
7 commanders, um, and by, uh, which, uh, has garnered
8 support from our also other county commanders.

9 I represent all of the veterans in the county.

10 Uh, wow, I'm trying not to go over, but it's too late
11 for that. Last year, on May 22nd, 2025, in a public
12 press release, former Mayor Eric Adams committed to
13 hosting committed the city to hosting the Homecoming
14 of Heroes, a ticker tape parade honoring our
15 post-9/11 combat veterans and their families, a
16 historic tribute recognizing the extraordinary
17 service and sacrifice and resilience of a generation
18 that bore the weight of America's longest war.

19 Recently, New York City, to withdraw from those major
20 events, has caused an uproar within our community.

21 At the moment that we should be preparing to lead, we
are instead stepping back.

The lack of commitment to these noteworthy events
like the 250th anniversary, the 25th anniversary of
September 11th, and more consequentially, the

1 decision to cancel the highly anticipated ticker tape
2 parade honoring the 25th anniversary of Operation
3 Enduring Freedom and subsequently Iraqi Freedom has
4 left many questioning how our city intends to
5 properly recognize and commemorate these historic
6 milestones.

7 The fundamental question asked by many now is,
8 what does New York City stand for if not to
9 commemorate— if not the commemoration of our nation's
10 history and the recognition of those who defend it?
11 It is important to understand the scale of sacrifice
12 associated with these conflicts. According to
13 official Department of Defense—

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Continue, please.

15 RICARDO GARCIA: Uh, official Department of
16 Defense reporting and major casualties tracking data,
17 the human cost of these wars includes Operation Iraqi
18 Freedom, over 4,419 service members killed.
19 Operation Enduring Freedom, over 2,459 service
20 members killed. In Operation New Dawn, which to
21 close out, 74 had passed away.

These figures represent thousands of families,
communities, and lives permanently changed— the
service, uh, ah, ah, and lives that permanently

1 changed in the service to the United States during
2 the longest sustained conflict in American history.
3 Yet despite these extraordinary sacrifices, there has
4 been no unified ticker tape parade recognition in the
5 Canyon of Heroes for this generation.

6 While the city has stated that hosting the
7 upcoming FIFA World Cup has placed an incredible
8 strain on the city resources, resulting in a shift in
9 priorities towards supporting that event, I ask, what
10 plausible reason do we have not to rise to the
11 occasion and meet all of these demands together as a
12 city, state, and nation?

13 While yes, the FIFA Cup, uh, World Cup is a
14 significant global event, and we understand the
15 logistical challenges associated with hosting an
16 event of that scale. It— but it cannot and must not,
17 um, come at the expense of honoring our country's
18 founding, our resilience in the face of terror, nor
19 should it diminish our obligation to recognize the
20 sacrifices of an entire generation of veterans to
21 whom we are eternally indebted.

The Mayor's proposal of a symbolic 5-borough ruck
march, while commendable, is not sufficient. These
milestones demand more than symbolism. They demand

1
2 visible, historic, and dignified recognition worthy
3 of their significance. To properly illustrate this
4 importance, I remind everyone of what occurred on
5 October— uh, on what, on what occurred on April 30th,
6 1789, when General George Washington marked the birth
7 of our American constitutional government in both a
8 symbolic and physical way that endures to this day.
9 After taking the oath of federal office on Wall
10 Street, he attended services at St. Paul's Chapel and
11 walked along Broadway, establishing a living
12 geographic link between faith, leadership, and the
13 founding of our republic.

14 Broadway is more than a roadway. It is sacred
15 civic ground. Today it is known as the Canyon of
16 Heroes where for generations New York City has
17 honored acts of extraordinary service, valor, and
18 national significance through ticker tape parades.
19 These are not mere celebrations. They are
20 declarations of who we are as people and what we
21 value as a nation.

History proves that even in moments of severe
crisis, New York has never abandoned this
responsibility. And history makes something else
unmistakably clear: every major American military

1 campaign for generation of service members has been
2 publicly and ceremonially recognized along this very
3 route, from World War I, World War II, Korea,
4 Vietnam, the Gulf War and those who served walk down
5 the Canyon of Heroes heroes, welcomed home by a
6 grateful city and a grateful nation.

7 Every era of war was acknowledged, every
8 generation was honored, every sacrifice was made
9 visible— every generation except one. The veterans
10 of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi
11 Freedom, who fought in the longest sustained conflict
12 in American history, have yet to receive the same
13 unified ceremonial recognition in the Canyon of
14 Heroes. That absence is not just an oversight, it is
15 a deviation from generations of unprecedented
16 principle.

17 It sends a message, whether intended or not, that
18 service stands— that their service stands apart, when
19 in truth it stands among the greatest chapters of
20 American military history. Even more concerning, in
21 contrast in priorities. At the very moment that the
Homecoming Heroes Parade was being canceled, the New
York City Council was actively advocating and urging
the Mayor to host a ticker tape parade for Artemis

1 astronauts, which to me is crazy. That should have
2 just happened. Let us be clear, honoring American
3 achievement in space is worthy and appropriate, but
4 to elevate the call while simultaneously stepping
5 back from honoring the men and women who fought and
6 sacrificed in two decades of war is a fundamental
7 question of values and priorities.

8 And what— I promise I'm going to wrap up soon.

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you.

10 RICARDO GARCIA: My apologies. Just, I want to
11 hear what you have to say, but I want to get to
12 everybody else as well. What message is, uh, yeah,
13 what message— thank you for being so gracious. Uh,
14 what message does that send to our veterans and their
15 fam— what message does that send to our veterans and
16 families— What does it say about who— about what and
17 who we choose to celebrate?

18 Today we are told the \$5 billion budget gaps, um,
19 you know, is preventing us from moving forward. In
20 1975, in the height of the fiscal collapse, the Daily
21 News stated, uh, 'Forward to the City, drop dead.'
City officials did not retreat, they acted. They
worked across federal, state, civic organizations,
private sector, and other, um, uh, uh, business

1 leaders to, to, to generate the funding for this.

2 Um, I'm not going to move forward with the rest of
3 this.

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you.

5 RICARDO GARCIA: But I just wanted to say that my
6 question to this Committee is that all New York City,
7 state, and federal elected leaders is, are you
8 willing to do the same today regarding the country?
9 And will you step up and ask the Mayor to reverse
10 this decision?— this travesty.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you for your service.
12 Uh, thank you for your testimony, and thank you for
13 the incredibly comprehensive and professional manner
14 in which you, uh, put together your testimony. I
15 think it says a lot about the seriousness in which
16 you approach this issue, and I can guarantee you
17 we'll review every word.

18 Uh, at this point, I wanna welcome, uh, Douglas
19 Brewsher of the Jericho Project. It's good to see
20 you, Mr. Brewsher.

21 DOUGLAS BREWSHER: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Uh, Mr.
uh—

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: We hear you.

1
2 DOUGLAS BREWSHER: Yes. Okay. Good afternoon,
3 Chairman Morano and, uh, Council Member Wong, and
4 thank you for your opportunity to speak this morning.
5 My name is Douglas Brewsher. I'm a proud veteran
6 from the Bronx who was spurred to join the army after
7 the attacks on 9/11, and I am here to advocate and
8 express my support for the nonprofits and veteran
9 programs that serve New York City.

10 These agencies provide critical support,
11 including job readiness training, mentorship, and of
12 course housing. The reality of economics today has
13 made housing of extreme importance. After returning
14 from Iraq— after returning from my third tour in
15 Iraq, I saw firsthand many veterans returning to New
16 York City after their service are not able to afford
17 the neighborhoods they grew up in or find jobs that
18 would allow them to provide for their families here.
19 To many born here like myself, New York City is the
20 only place that I feel at home. New York should
21 recognize that veterans are a valuable resource for
the city that contributes both to the economy and
community in a positive manner.

I have worked for the Jericho Project, a
nonprofit that houses homeless and

1 at-risk-for-homelessness veterans, for 8 years. I
2 have seen how access to housing and structured
3 programs can reduce isolation, improve mental health,
4 and create pathways to employment. For many veterans
5 transitioning back to civilian life, all of these—
6 all of these services are essential.

7 I thank the Council for all of your support, and
8 it is needed more now than ever. Recent cuts to the
9 VA have caused backlogs, overworked remaining case
10 managers, and have inconvenienced many veterans in
11 the New York City area. As Chairman Morano said, the
12 veterans returning home will be facing a new set of
13 challenges than previous generations. AI is changing
14 the job market. Unaffordability is changing the
15 housing market. For every dollar spent on prevention
16 and support services, it can reduce the cost related
17 to homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, and
18 emergency services in the future.

19 I respectfully ask the Council to continue
20 funding veterans programs and prioritize the
21 decisions that strengthen our community
infrastructure to ensure that no veteran is left
behind.

1
2 Thank you for your opportunity to speak today,
3 and thank you for your consideration on these
4 matters.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, very quickly, I'd love
6 to ask all 4 of you, and, and if you could answer in
7 45 seconds or less, um, I appreciate those of you
8 that spoke about the parade. At that same
9 announcement that Mayor Adams made with former
10 Commissioner Hendon, uh, they announced not only the
11 ticker tape parade, but an upcoming memorial, uh, for
12 post-9/11 servicemen, uh, that's going to be in, uh,
13 Whitestone, Queens.

14 Just curious, one, if you guys know about that,
15 two, what you think about it, and if you think that's
16 an appropriate tribute for the, uh, post-9/11 folks.
17 We'll go, uh, from this way to that way, and just if
18 you can, just briefly.

19 DOUGLAS BREWSHER: Uh, yes, I, I have heard of
20 it. Um, uh, I, I do know that a lot of, uh,
21 post-9/11 guys are aware of it, uh, after the
initial, uh, announcement. Haven't heard much after
that. Um, it's mainly been, uh, uh, talked about
sort of in the abstract for as far as I can tell.

1 Uh, the announcement about the parade was made.
2 I think last week that they were canceling it. And I
3 think, uh, or everyone in- from my generation that I
4 know is aware of, uh, of the cancellation. They echo
5 the sentiments made by these gentlemen.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Understood. Mr. Diaz?

7 LIEUTENANT G. RIECO DIAZ: Yeah, I heard about
8 the Memorial Park, uh, memorial that they were
9 establishing. I thought that was a done deal. I-
10 because my experience, um, I, uh, I, I joined them- I
11 joined the military during Vietnam, but I didn't
12 serve in Vietnam. But I continued to serve in the
13 other two next- the couple of wars that we had. When
14 I visited the actual Vietnam Memorial for the very
15 first time, I was overwhelmed.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Hmm.

17 LIEUTENANT G. RIECO DIAZ: I mean, I know what
18 that significance meant. I think that the, uh, a
19 memorial for this, for the, uh, for the post-9/11
20 veterans would have the same effect because as, uh,
21 uh, Garcia has already mentioned, the number of, uh,
people that sacrificed and gave everything, their
children can visit them. That'll be important for
the families, for the wives, for those left behind,

to be able to go somewhere and together these veterans can remember those that we left behind, those that we lost in the family.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: So, you think it's an appropriate—

LIEUTENANT G. RIECO DIAZ: Absolutely, sir.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yes, sir.

MIKE MUNOZ: I, um, I was— I was told about the memorial by Councilwoman Paldino, and I support it. Um, I also heard from my post 9/11 veteran community that more input from our community should be considered because many of them felt like there wasn't—

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: In the memorial itself and with the design or?

MIKE MUNOZ: For them, for the design of the memorial.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Understood.

MIKE MUNOZ: So, uh, I feel that more input from the post-9/11 community—

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Got it—

MIKE MUNOZ: Should be considered.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Got it. Thank you, Mr. Garcia briefly.

1
2 RICARDO GARCIA: I, I echo, um, I promise very
3 brief. I echo all of the sentiments here. I was
4 familiar with the post, uh, with the post-9/11
5 memorial, and I think it's a fantastic tribute, uh,
6 to honor all of our veterans that served in, uh,
7 after, uh, 9/11. And I agree with our— my fellow
8 Legionnaire that, um, more insight from the community
9 to the development, how it should look.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Hmm, thank you all very,
11 very much. At this point, uh, we'll call up our next
12 panel. Uh, please come on up when you hear your name
13 called. Uh, Michael Matos of Five Borough Veterans,
14 uh, Camille O— O— Okonkwo of the New York Health
15 Foundation, uh, Roman Baca of Exit 12, and, uh,
16 Joshua Sooklal of Hope for the Warriors.

17 And again, if I mispronounce anyone's name,
18 please correct me when you, when you speak. Uh,
19 we'll begin with you, Mr. Matos.

20 MICHAEL MATOS: Good afternoon, Chair Morano.

21 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Nice to see you again.

MICHAEL MATOS: Oh, you as well. Good afternoon,
Chairman Morano and Members of the Committee. My
name is Michael Matos and I serve as the President of
the Five Borough Veterans. This September will mark

the 25th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the loss of the passengers of Flight 93, who courageously sacrificed themselves to stop Al-Qaeda terrorists from doing further harm on the people of Washington, D.C..

This September will also mark the 25th anniversary of the beginning of what will become the longest war in our nation's history. I was in the first grade, being evacuated from my elementary school on the west side of Manhattan when the Twin Towers came crashing down. I would soon learn that one of my role models, Captain Patty Brown of Ladder 3, gave his life to ensure the safe evacuation of the North Tower after refusing the order to evacuate the building himself.

Later on in my studies, I would learn about the great boat lift of 9/11 led by the United States Coast Guard, where half a million people were rescued from Lower Manhattan in less than 9 hours, making it the largest maritime rescue in our history. Upon graduating high school, I would enlist in the military and serve 10 years in the Coast Guard specializing in search and rescue and anti-terrorism.

1 We all have our own story on how 9/11 impacted
2 us. For many of us in the military-connected
3 community, it became the reason why we chose to
4 serve. The decades of war that followed, however,
5 give testament as to why serving the post-9/11
6 generation of veterans is complex and requires a
7 detailed level of intentionality. Our community
8 lived through 20 years of war, a war that we did not
9 win. We were told that we were fighting for freedom,
10 halting the development of weapons of mass
11 destruction, and liberating oppressed populations
12 from tyrannical rule. Yet after years of sacrifice,
13 we left in a matter of months, leaving the oppressors
14 to take control once again.

15 One war ended while another continued. Veteran
16 service organizations in the VA crisis line saw an
17 unprecedented spike in calls for help. Long nights
18 and hours of phone calls as veterans attempted to
19 coordinate the evacuation of their interpreters, now
20 being hunted for assisting American forces.

21 In the halls of government, our advocates found
resistance in passing legislation to ensure care for
toxic exposures, expanded higher education access,
and ongoing efforts to ensure full access to medical

1 retirement compensation. For those of us that worked
2 on the Afghan Adjustment Act, we began receiving
3 outreach from interpreters and their families begging
4 for our help and confused as to why we abandoned
5 them. We may celebrate our service and those who we
6 served with, but make no mistake, these wounds have
7 yet to heal.

8 As we continue to explore how we may best serve
9 and honor this generation of veterans, our approach
10 must be measured and intentional, with the community
11 itself leading from the front. We are a demographic
12 of business owners, students, and leaders. Our
13 service abroad may be complete, but our impact on New
14 York City remains substantial. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Matos. Um,
16 do you have a feeling about what I just asked these
17 fellows about the design of the, uh, post-9/11 fallen
18 service memorial that's slated to go up in
19 Whitestone?

20 MICHAEL MATOS: I am aware of it. Uh, last time
21 I heard it was an ideation from, uh, the community
itself, there was more interest in having more
feedback on the design and such. Um, so I look
forward to seeing what comes of that. I myself, I'm

1 more interested in seeing how we can work together as
2 a community to ensure that those that are in the city
3 are being served and recognized not only for their
4 service but the impact they have on the city after
5 service.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: What are the challenges that
7 the veterans community faces in terms of not working
8 together as a community, and what can this Committee
9 do? What could DVS do in order to, I don't know,
better help the veterans community organize?

10 MICHAEL MATOS: I will say first recognizing we
11 are a community of very proud people, so as you can
12 imagine, we have, uh, strong personalities butting
13 heads all the time. I say that in the best way
14 possible. Um, I think one of the things we can focus
15 on is— one of my personal focuses— I know we're in a
16 time of a division when it comes to political
17 partisanship. My focus is trying to bring folks
18 together beyond partisanship and working on how we
19 can solve the problems that not only affect us as a
veterans and military-connected community, but as New
York in general.

20 So I think I think if we all just remember that
21 we have a dedication to service as a community and

find that as our next mission, we can be successful in making that happen.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Matos. Uh, at this point, I want to welcome, uh, Camille Okonkwo of the New York Health Foundation. Hi there.

CAMILLE OKONKWO: Thank you, Chairperson Morano, and thank you, Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify today. Good morning. My name is Camille Okonkwo, Policy and Research Associate at the New York Health Foundation, a private foundation committed to improving the health of all New Yorkers, including our city's roughly 120,000 veterans. I'm also the daughter of a former U.S. army sergeant and the sister of a former airman.

More than 25 years have passed since 9/11, and the needs of this generation of veterans have evolved significantly. It's remarkably difficult to get good data on post-9/11 11 veterans. Veteran status is rarely captured consistently across health, housing, or justice systems in a granular way and at the city level. The foundation is one of the few organizations that publishes data on veterans in New York City and state.

For example, we've published research on veterans including needs assessments, deaths of despair, veteran treatment courts, and suicide rates going back a decade. From this data, we know that post-9/11 veterans are more racially and ethnically diverse, more highly educated, and more likely to be women. The research we do gives us an evidence base that doesn't exist anywhere else for this population.

For instance, our research shows that in New York City, veterans die by suicide at roughly twice the rate of civilians. Some of the highest suicide rates are from post-9/11 veterans. Deaths of despair are significantly higher among veterans than non-veterans. Also, our research on veteran treatment courts designed to keep veterans out of the justice pipeline shows a promising intervention. There's a heavy overlap between VTC participants and the post-9/11 generation of veterans who tend to be younger and more racially diverse. One of the most consequential and least discussed issues is the disproportionate targeting of post-9/11 veterans, particularly LGBTQ veterans, for other than honorable discharges under Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

The foundation has invested in expanding veterans' mental health services on college campuses to be where student veterans are. We have specific recommendations listed in our testimony, but broadly, we urge the city to close data gaps, support culturally competent mental health care in private settings and on campuses, expand peer outreach programs, and ensure private providers are equipped to serve veterans. The foundation is ready to be your committed partner in building a stronger evidence base to improve the well-being of New York's veterans, and together we can make a lasting impact. Thank you for your dedication.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Uh, thank you, Miss Okonkwo,
not only for your family service and for your

1 testimony, but for actually offering very specific
2 recommendations of how we can serve, uh, New York's
3 veteran community. I promise you I'll be taking all
4 of them seriously. Just because it's a theme that
5 we've heard repeated now, I, I do wanna ask you, and
6 whether you're speaking on your own or on behalf of
7 the New York Health Foundation, either is fine, about
8 your, your thoughts on strengthening outreach and
9 engagement.

10 So many folks have mentioned the outreach issue.
11 What do you think the single biggest thing that the
12 New York City veterans community, whether it's
13 nonprofits, whether it's DVS, whether it's the City
14 Council, whether it's individual Council Members,
15 what's the single biggest thing we can do to reach
16 out specifically to post-9/11 veterans?

17 CAMILLE OKONKWO: That's a great question. Um,
18 I'd love to get back to my colleagues, um, just to
19 make sure I'm giving you great information.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Sure, great.

21 CAMILLE OKONKWO: If you can follow up with me,
Chair.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yeah, I'll make sure you
have my email and would love to hear the answer.

1 Thank you. Uh, at this point, I want to welcome, uh,
2 Roman Baca, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War and the
3 Co-Founder of Exit 12 Dance Company.

4 ROMAN BACA: Thank you, Chairman Morano, uh, City
5 Council Members and Council- sitting Council. Um,
6 I'm going to skip the first page of my testimony
7 because you've addressed most of it.

8 My name is Roman Baca. I'm a U.S. Marine Iraq
9 War veteran and Co-Founder of Exit 12 Dance Company.
10 I've been working in veterans art and recovery as
11 well as advocacy in New York since leaving the Marine
12 Corps. I have worked and partnered with
13 organizations such as The Mission Continues, Iraq and
14 Afghanistan Veterans of America, and several arts
15 organizations. I lead my own nonprofit, Exit 12
16 Dance Company.

17 Exit 12 started here in New York, and it's where
18 it calls home. Currently, we have several programs
19 running in the city. Along- across the five
20 boroughs, partnering with the Intrepid Museum for our
21 flagship program, and running programs within the
Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Bronx VAs. We like to quip
that the scariest word that you will mutter around a
veteran is the word dance. However, I will remind

you that not only is the U.S. military the largest employer of musicians in the United States, but that every service member has learned choreography, rehearsed choreography, and might have been able to practice that choreography in the theater of war.

Our work is more than just entertainment. It uses theater, music, and dance to turn veterans' stories into powerful ways to connect with audiences and uncover the humans that serve beneath the uniform.

Our work, funded in part by the Dwyer Program, builds community and helps individuals build a vision and shared purpose. As this Council may be aware, the Department of Veterans and, er, Affairs is in process of eliminating up to 83,000 positions by the end of 2025, including approximately 35,000 of which are currently vacant. Having worked with the VA system across the country and here in New York City, I want to offer a ground-level picture of what those cuts mean in practice. These cuts will not only hurt the veterans that are currently connected to the Veterans Affairs system, but will also hurt post-9/11 veterans who have not self-identified. Many people think of the VA as just a medical system. What is

less understood is that many veterans look at the VA as their primary source of community.

At the Manhattan VA, they host arts days. At the Bronx VA, a new coffee shop is being built where they can have coffee with their peers. And at the Brooklyn VA, veterans regularly feel— fill the clubhouse sharing coffee, laughter, and each other's company. This kind of peer-to-peer connection is essential to reducing isolation and depression in our population. But these spaces and programs are now at risk. The VA facilities in New York City have lost arts therapists, community organizers, and clinicians.

I'm gonna wrap up.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Go ahead.

ROMAN BACA: And those positions are not being filled. The remaining staff are stretched beyond capacity and services are contracting. Nonprofits including Exit 12 are stepping in to fill the gap with vital community programming, but many of us are struggling to secure adequate funding to sustain the services we are providing.

I respectfully call on this Council to meet with us and other nonprofits to discuss ways that we would

1 allow organizations like Exit-12 to continue
2 supporting the physical and mental health of New York
3 City veterans. You could be the Council Members who
4 grow this community, empower our veterans, and
5 bringing them together in shared purpose, and for
6 that I thank you in advance.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, uh, Mr. Baca, and
8 I, I thank you for your service and, uh, your
9 testimony. I, I'd certainly be happy to meet with
10 you and, uh, convene a broader roundtable of, of
11 veterans and in the arts initiatives and, uh,
12 non-traditional therapeutic approaches, uh, to
13 veterans as well. And I will note that, uh, they say
14 it's a frightening thing to bring up dance and, uh,
15 the, the things like that to veterans. Gene Kelly
16 was a lieutenant junior grade in the Navy, so I think
17 that bears, bears repeating.

18 Alright, I wanna welcome, uh, Joshua Sooklal, who
19 is with Hope for the Warriors. Hello, sir.

20 JOSHUA SOOKLAL: Chair Morano, uh, thank you very
21 much for having me. Ah, hi, my name is Joshua
Sooklal. I am a prior undocumented immigrant. prior
Navy corpsman, current John Jay master's student,
current staff member at Hope for the Warriors. And I

1 just came here to say hi. How are you, really?
2 Because everybody that came up, and yourself
3 included, to, uh, Council Member Vicki Paladino has
4 said everything I needed to say.

5 So all I want to say really is leave you with
6 this: I'd like, uh, Commissioner Mata to have 200
7 more meetings because she has done so great since
8 she's been in. She's honestly been really just
9 charging ahead, trying to figure out who's who, and I
10 commend that, and I really want to say thank you.

11 Um, I'd like to just also point out, yeah, I don't
12 know why we have these bureaucratic policies and laws
13 that just hinder us, because that's what it does.

14 We're not being good humans. Right? I'm still
15 asking, why does the city agency have the lowest
16 budget? You get— we're all kind of tiptoeing around
17 this idea of a parade that the city does not need to
18 spend money on. But what we could spend money on is
19 our people, our veterans, the people that served us.
20 I could throw quotes at you. Someone actually said a
21 quote that's great on the 23rd Street VA about George
Washington, what he said about how we treat veterans.
There's no need anymore.

1 I've been working for Hope for the Warriors for 4
2 years. Within my first year, I realized what was
3 going on. It's a lot of people in the mix.
4 Everybody does not want to work together, and I'm
5 here to say, hey, just come work with me. So I'm— I
6 applaud you to say this. Um, May 25th, the Brooklyn
7 Memorial Day Parade, the oldest Memorial Day parade
8 you'll ever see, and it's in New York, it's in
9 Brooklyn. Please show up.

10 And on July 9th in Staten Island, please show up
11 to the FDNY 171, letter 81. And I want to show you
12 the best thing you'll ever see in your life. It's
13 called Warrior Weekend, and it's hosted by the FDNY
14 and myself, Hope for the Warriors. And that goes for
15 everybody here. So come out and see how I work and
16 see what I do. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Sooklal. Um,
18 with the understanding that, uh, Mr. Matos mentioned
19 that a lot of people in the veterans community have
20 varying opinions on everything, and it's very
21 difficult to necessarily find consensus. Just to
drill down on what you alluded to about the idea of a
ticker tape parade, er, am I clear in my
understanding, uh, that that you don't necessarily

1 think that that should be a priority of city
2 resources, is putting on a ticker tape parade for the
3 post-9/11 veterans.

4 JOSHUA SOOKLAL: You saw yourself in that
5 roundtable, um, Chair Morano. Uh, we wanna do a ruck
6 run, and it's not even for the ruck run. It's
7 because it builds camaraderie. Do you think a parade
8 will build camaraderie? We have the veterans that
9 parade. We talked to each other there. That's good
10 enough. I know the parade isn't gonna do anything.
11 But walking together, embracing the suck, as we would
12 call it, running, whatever it is, as long as it
13 builds that camaraderie, we're gonna get that result.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much. Thank
15 you all. Thank you, all 4 of you, for your
16 testimony. Appreciate you being here.

17 Alright, uh, we'll call up our next panel of, uh,
18 Timothy Peña, Joe Bello, and Nadia Ascensio. And as
19 always, if I mispronounce anyone's name, please
20 correct me. Thank you, Mr. Peña. Uh, when you're
21 ready, you can kick us off.

TIMOTHY PENA: Thank you. Nice to see you,
Council Member Morano. Um, so I had, uh— my name is
Timothy Peña. I run an organization called Veterans

1 Justice Project. I'm also a, um, Navy veteran. I
2 was present in the Persian Gulf during the Iranian
3 hostage siege and rescue attempt, and, um, and
4 therefore, uh, considered disabled with PTSD as a
5 result of that service. I come today because I had a
6 couple of issues this week, and then I was looking
7 at, uh, this bill that was passed today. I just want
8 to state, um, that I think anything that we're doing
9 is great for the veterans. Um, I took a look through
10 HPD, some of the other city, um, programs this
11 morning. Um, not a whisper of whether or not we
12 served still, and I don't know how long we've been
13 told that that's been added, but I still can't find
14 anything. And anybody that I have ever asked about,
15 um, housing for, uh, veterans, um, experiencing
16 homelessness, uh, they've never said anything or
17 given me any indication that we have any kind of, um,
18 preference over non-veterans.

16 So that said, um, I do want to again, uh, comment
17 on the, um, the issue of veterans not
18 self-identifying. And I just leave this with, um,
19 give us a reason, please, to self-identify. Um, I've
20 been in other communities where the veterans, um, are
21 there, they're out, people know who they are. Um,

1 they're not sitting on street corners with, um, a
2 homeless veteran sign like we see here in New York
3 City.

4 Um, I, uh, um, on just a quick Sunday morning, I
5 got a phone call from a father in Alabama. His son
6 had gone missing here in New York City. Um, we
7 tracked him down and um, we're, we're helping him as
8 best we can. But I was really troubled to find that
9 he had been over to the VA hospital, been turned away
10 because he's got a dog with him. And so I ended up,
11 um, getting in touch with his mental health doctor
12 down in Alabama. We got a letter sent up, um,
13 stating that his dog is, uh, service animal. And,
14 um, but I was really troubled when I was told that
15 Borden Avenue has been closed. And I was speaking to
16 veterans there at the VA. Thank you. I was speaking
17 to veterans there at the VA, and we're not getting
18 into the VA programs. We are being sent, um, one
19 guy's 100% PTSD. He's in an open bay in some shelter
20 somewhere, um, couldn't even tell me where, uh, they
21 wouldn't even let him shave. We need our VA
programs.

Those programs are for us in the VA system, and
we're just not getting access to it. I'm not sure

1 what happened over at Borden Avenue. I'm going to
2 find out this afternoon, but they are turning
3 veterans away in the VA system to leave— whether
4 they're veterans or not, I don't know— but they're
5 leaving people in there with violent sex offenders
6 who are not in the VA system, and we should have
7 first priority at all times.

8 There's no reason for us to be sitting on the
9 street or walking around with a no shirt and a little
10 dog, um, because no one, no one will step up to the
11 plate. Thank you for your time.

12 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Peña. Um,
13 just so we can go in this direction, I'll welcome,
14 uh, Nadia Asencio. Thank you for being here.

15 NADIA ASENCIO: Hi, thank you for having me. So
16 I'll try to be quick, uh, the question being what's
17 the best way to help veterans. It's definitely, in
18 my opinion, housing, um, and I'll tell you why. When
19 I finished my contract at SOFCOM(SP?), Southern
20 Command, in Miami, Florida, uh, where I met my best
21 friend Mike Munoz, that guy, uh, after I finished
that, I wanted to move back to the city, and I did.
And of course, like most veteran— like most New
Yorkers, I couldn't afford afford rent. Uh, so I

I rolled around New York City like most New Yorkers renting rooms for \$1,200 a month in somebody else's apartment, you know, having to deal with whatever it is that's going on in their house. I wound up finally homeless, living in a van. And when I say a van, I don't mean like something with a toilet and— no, a van. A literal van, for 4 months during the coldest winter in New York City. And that's when finally, after 8 years, my number came up in the Mitchell Lama building, 8 years. It was almost a decade. Why? If I'm a veteran and I had preference, why would it have taken 8 years? And there was no way for me to know if I had preference or not because there's no list. There's no way to see who was in front of me, who was behind. There's no rhyme or reason to any of it.

Before giving any veteran, in my opinion, you know, when you serve, you do it for your own reason. Maybe you have to go to school, maybe you do it because you're a patriot, but ticker tape parades and the, the constant, like, thank you for your service,

1 in my opinion, is unnecessary. That's ego-driven. I
2 think more important than that is to help veterans
3 with what they actually need. And I, I can't think
4 of anything more important than affordable housing,
5 safe, stable, affordable housing, and also
6 transparency so that the government can actually see
7 what's going on with that. Because as a veteran
8 that's gone through a lot of, like, the VA and VA
9 this and VA that, I, I'm gonna tell you straight up,
10 a lot of money is being wasted on these programs.
11 The people who work there don't know what they're
12 doing. They don't actually help. They don't help
13 place you with jobs. They don't help. They don't
14 know what— none of them know what they're doing and
15 there's no oversight because of course, and I know
16 how it works. I worked in politics for a very long
17 time. Budgets, budgets, you know, somebody's getting
18 paid so we can ask for the same money next year and
19 that's fine. But on top of doing just that, there
20 also should be some oversight so that these programs
21 can actually make a difference because if not, what
are we doing? What are we doing?

There's no reason why, in my opinion, veterans,
like this gentleman just said, should be like, if

1 they need to go into full-time psychiatric care, then
2 that should be taken care of. If the VA can't do it,
3 it should be privatized. And these departments need
4 strong oversight to make sure that everybody who is
5 working there is actually serving the veteran
6 community. Thank you so much for your time.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you. Uh, just so I'm
8 clear then, it sounds like you're certainly in favor
9 of the legislation that we're considering, uh, hmm,
10 Intro 0488 with respect to veteran preferences at
11 Mitchell Lama Housing.

12 NADIA ASECIO: Yes, absolutely. But not just
13 the preference, because a preference without
14 enforcement might as well not exist. Why did it take
15 almost a decade for me to get--

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yeah.

17 NADIA ASECIO: You know and it's not just me.
18 Like, Mikey got his the year before me, so now we're
19 in the same building. Wow, how, how great, right?
20 We're so lucky to have that. But how many veterans
21 are on the street and just waiting and waiting?
Things happen on the street. Let me just explain to
you right now.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yeah, well, at least 600, at least 600 from what we know in New York alone.

NADIA ASECIO: At least, but things happen on the street. As you're waiting, I mean, I was in a van. Nobody knew I was in a van. Nobody could imagine I was in a van.

At the time, I had a very, very successful YouTube channel, and I guarantee you, not one of my subscribers knew that that's what I was going through. You can't judge people on the way that they look. You have no idea what they're going through. Nothing. And when they get to the street, when you're on the street level, anything can happen from there. And even the most upright citizen with the best education ends up on the street for too long, you'd be surprised what, what comes out of that.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Ms. Asencio.

NADIA ASECIO: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright, I wanna welcome Joe Bello of New York Metro Vets. It is good to see you again, Mr. Bello.

JOR BELLO: Good to see you too. Thank you. Um, so I'm, I'm just gonna make a few comments here. Uh, I think when, uh, I was glad to hear today, I think,

um, one of the problems with, uh, not just OIF/OEF veterans, but with all veterans has been the VetConnect system.

Um, you know, going back on it several years, there was no real kind of- it was, it was built up through Unite Us. It came through, and then for some reason, which we don't know to this day, uh, DVS decided to go in a different direction. And for almost a year and a half, basically had a, like, a, a form of Microsoft Doc that you would get into. And during that time between that and coming into the combined arms system, a lot of vets just started to bail out the system. And not only veterans, but nonprofits. Because if, if I have a veteran that presents to me at a nonprofit and he is- he has either substance abuse or he's suicidal ideation, I'm not gonna sit there and input into a VetConnect system that literally says you probably have to wait like 96 hours to get an answer.

So you're going to make that phone call to another non-for-profit or to a city agency to get that person immediate help. So subsequently, uh, you know, this new form require- this new combined armed system requires people to, like, create an account,

1 and a lot of older veterans don't want to do that.
2 And that leads to the second issue, not knowing, you
3 know, how many people do the— does the agency have
4 currently doing outreach or doing that kind of work,
5 especially if you're getting older veterans that are
6 coming in and are saying, hey, I'm, I'm not filling
7 this, this whole form out, and most likely I'm only
8 using it one time, and I'm never, you know, you're
9 gonna fill it out for me, and I'm never gonna use it
again.

10 So I think that becomes, uh, a big problem in
11 terms of getting, like, people and help. I mean,
12 people will reach out to DVS, but I think in terms of
13 using that form, the second problem would be, I
14 think, and, and this is something I've written out
15 has been, um, the staff. And I've written about,
16 like, how the staff has been basically stretched
17 going back, uh, and a lot of the staff carry, like,
18 these— they carry multiple assignments, so to speak.
19 So they come in to do one job, but they're doing, uh,
20 a second job, maybe a tertiary job, uh, you know, it,
21 it could be anything from doing housing and Dwyer and
outreach, or it could be from doing, uh, you know,
er, uh, leadership and doing entrepreneurship.

Uh, if we're about data and outcomes, and you've heard me testify about this before, then I think that's extremely important. Uh, you know, importantly, the legislation does not create new burdens on applicants or restrict access. Instead,

1
2 it strengthens accountability by ensuring the city is
3 able to track the outcomes and maintain clear
4 safeguards around eligibility. Uh, I respectfully
5 urge this Council to pass this Intro, uh, especially
6 since it was— it was kind of left behind in the last
Council.

7 Uh, I want to thank also Councilman Brewer, who
8 originally addressed this Mitchell-Lama housing for
9 veterans back in 2009, for those of us who were here
10 in 2009, and, uh, Councilman Vernikov for
reintroducing this Intro and bringing it forward.

11 So I, uh, thank you for the opportunity.

12 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Bello, for
13 your testimony and, uh, for your longstanding
14 activism in the veterans community and for the great
15 job that you do keeping both veterans and those of us
16 that are interested in veteran policy informed on
your newsletter, which is terrific.

17 JOE BELLO: If I may say, I did write an op-ed in
18 September about the, uh, the memorial, the 9/11
memorial.

19 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I took note of it and
20 informed, uh, some of the questions that I raised
21

1 today. Um, do you have an opinion on one of the
2 things that's come up today, the ticker tape parade?

3 JOE BELLO: I, I, my personal opinion is I would
4 like to have seen it done. Uh, again, uh, you know,
5 full transparency, I was at the 1991 parade, so I
6 remember what the parade was. I remember what it
7 represented. I remember the joy. I remember the,
8 you know, the happiness, the camaraderie. I mean, if
9 that's the case, then, you know, what, what do we,
10 what do we say about the Veterans Day parade.

11 So I personally would have liked to have seen a
12 parade. I, I- my, my article, as you've read, I, I,
13 you know, when you balance the scale between what is
14 a ticker tape parade, which is something honoring,
15 you know, everybody who served in OIF, OEF, New Dawn,
16 versus a ruck, they just don't match on the scale,
17 uh, you know, even with a resource fair. And I, and
18 I will say there have been a number of vets who
19 particularly- I, I think anybody from 40 older. I
20 mean, I'm not saying, you know, everybody makes a
21 decision, but I don't think you're going to see a lot
of the older vets. I mean, if you're looking for- if
this is strictly like an OIF/OEF ruck, then, you
know, maybe you wind up with the Travis Manion and,

you know, Five Borough and a few others but I'm not sure what that, what that looks like.

The other thing I think a lot of us were concerned about was it was framed as, uh, tied to September 11th b-but on September 13th, but it was tied into September 11th. We don't celebrate veterans on September 11th. You know, anybody who was here in the city on September 11th remembers that day. I certainly do.

So, you know, I think that, um, there could have been a little more communication, not just with certain individuals, but I think the community as a whole.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: By the previous Administration?

JOE BELLO: I, I think by the previous and, and the current Administration.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Got it.

JOE BELLO: I mean, look, I, as, as I wrote, If they knew there was, you know, we know there's a budget deficit. We know there's these other things going on. It, it, it's one thing to have, um, you know, and, uh, respectfully, a roundtable, but you're

missing, you know, those people are representing a large segment that we're not monolithic.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Understood.

JOE BELLO: And so, you know, I think that with more communication, you know, I think it, it probably would've went down a little bit better. You know, there would've been some unhappiness, but I think it could have went down a little better, but it just felt like it was just quietly released to News 12, and then all this stuff started popping out. And, you know, veterans, like has been said, we have strong opinions about things, and, you know, you're gonna get- it's great, it's not great, so.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr. Bello. Uh, alright, that is everybody that I have on my list of folks that signed up to testify. Uh, I wanna thank everybody that came here to share their thoughts and their experiences. I certainly learned a lot. I've been jotting down different ideas for potential legislation based on some of the ideas that you guys have brought up.

If there is anyone else in the room who wishes to speak but has not yet had the opportunity to do so, uh, please just raise your hand and fill out an

1 appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms at the back
2 of the room. We'd be happy to hear from you, uh, and
3 if there's anybody that wants to stay and get in
4 touch with me, uh, I'll stick around a couple of
5 minutes after the meeting, um, and give you my card,
6 and I'm happy to engage with you via email and meet
7 in person as needed.

8 Um, that concludes the in-person portion of our
9 testimony. We'll now move to remote testimony if
10 there is anyone on Zoom. Alright, so, okay, if
11 there's anyone, uh, if there is anyone else currently
12 on Zoom who wishes to speak, uh, but hasn't signed up
13 to do so, just use the raise hand function and our
14 staff will unmute you. And, uh, again, if there's
15 anyone else present in the room who hasn't had the
16 opportunity to testify but wants to, just raise your
17 hand in person as well. I'll give you— everybody 40
18 seconds, a minute.

19 Alright. Uh, seeing no hands, if there are folks
20 watching this on Channel 74 or on YouTube and they
21 decide that they would, would like to make their
opinions known on anything that we've covered today,
uh, please, you can submit written testimony to
testimony@council.nyc.gov. That's

testimony@council.nyc.gov. within 72 hours of this hearing.

Uh, to conclude, I'm grateful to everyone that attended today's hearing. I am particularly appreciative that we have a DVS Commissioner that, even though she's maybe the busiest person that I know, made sure to stay and listen to every single person that testified, uh, and seemed very engaged and took notes on what everybody was saying. And, uh, that kind of stewardship of an agency only comes with a terrific Chief of Staff like Nicole Orlando. So, uh, thank you to everybody for being here.

So, uh, with that, this hearing is now adjourned.

[GAVEL]

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.

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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Date August 19, 2026