

Testimony of James Hendon

Commissioner, New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)

New York City Council Committee on Finance

Topic: An Update on Implementing Recommendations from the City Council's Report Card Initiative

Wednesday, December 3rd, 2025 – 1:00 PM

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, members of the Veterans Committee, US Military Service Members, past and present, and Veteran Community supporters, benefactors and allies. My name is James Hendon. I am proud to serve as Commissioner of the NYC Department of Veterans Services (DVS). Joining me today is Nicole Orlando, Deputy Chief of Staff and Director of Veteran Transition and Donee' Smalls, Executive Director for Housing Support Services. We are honored to appear before you in this discussion that follows up on the points made in the April 2025 City Council DVS Scorecard.

First and foremost: I would like to once again thank and acknowledge all who were apart of this process. I want to acknowledge our team at DVS, many of whom contributed to the agency's response. I would like to recognize those in the Council who were directly involved in this; by unit, I would like to call out City Council Compliance, Data Operations, Web Development, the Committee on Veterans, Event and Production Services, Oversight and Investigations, and those who contributed to the editing of this document. Last, but not least, I would like to recognize all Veterans and community advocates who contributed. Any day when we are talking about Veterans is a good day. I recognize that we all have different roles, but everyone's unified goal (who was involved in this process) is to see better outcomes and services delivered to US Military Service Members, past and present, and their loved ones in this great city.

Before getting into the weeds on certain aspects of our response to the scorecard and where the agency stands in the wake of the report at this time, I want to acknowledge certain foundational issues in what is a well-intentioned, but (in certain places), flawed analysis.

- For one thing, I want to remind the Council that DVS estimates there to be more than 200,000 Veterans in New York City – especially when accounting for those who either: a) currently serve in the military (of all components – Active Duty, Guard, and Reserve) or b) are former Guardsmen and Reservists who were never placed on Active Duty status. (the Census Bureau does not count these groups). As an example: I, Commissioner of the NYC Department of Veterans' Services, have served in the military for 23 years – seven as an Active Duty Officer who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, 16 as a US Army Reservist. I am still serving. I am not counted in the Census Bureau's data as being a

Veteran. That said, while we estimate that more than 200,000 Veterans live in New York City, according to a City Council Spokesperson who communicated with the media when the report was released, “only 21 people were surveyed as part of the report.” Twenty-one out of more than 200,000 Veterans is less than 0.01% of our community. The size, makeup, and method of selection limit what can be inferred. Repeatedly leaning on this small group throughout the report—without clearly noting those limitations—does the analysis a disservice.

- This brings me to my second point: leaders from the largest Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) in New York City were not included in this discussion. The VSOs that have a strong enough presence in New York City to have paid, full-time staff operating in the five boroughs at the time of the Council’s analysis were: the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Wounded Warrior Project, Blue Star Families, Black Veterans for Social Justice, and Hope for the Warriors. No senior person from each of these VSOs participated in the Council’s surveys nor its discussions to our knowledge. I am speaking of no District Commander for the American Legion or VFW, no leadership from the DAV Department of New York, no person who leads the New York City teams for the Wounded Project, Blue Star Families, or Hope for the Warriors, and no one at the C-Suite level from Black Veterans for Social Justice, New York City’s largest homegrown Veteran Service Organization. We respect the views of the 21 participants; we also believe that omitting senior VSO voices—those with scale, caseload, and citywide reach—constrains the utility of the findings. For future surveys, please start with the question: Who are the largest actors in this domain, and are their senior leaders at the table? That approach will strengthen any conclusions drawn.
- The last thing I want to touch on before we discuss the scorecard is its contradictions. In many cases, one page says one thing, another page says something else, or what is said in the scorecard does not match with reality. Case and point:
 - Borden Avenue Veterans Residence is a Department of Homeless Services-run shelter—with select beds that are subsidized by the VA—that exclusively houses Veterans in New York City. One page says DVS has no presence at Borden Avenue Veterans Residence. Another page says the truth, which is that we maintain a daily presence at Borden Avenue.
 - One page says that DVS is not transparent about data. Another page points out that DVS makes information available through the Open Data Portal, Mayor’s Management Reports, and Local Law reporting. I would also point the public to

nyc.gov/vetreports, a website where we publish our data-related information, reporting, and outputs.

- One page says that DVS does not provide descriptions of roles in the agency. A description of each role in the agency – along with explanations of our methods of data collection, definitions for specific terms, summaries of our programs, and DVS’ overall performance information can be found in the annual report that we submit in accordance with Local Law 44 of 2019. This, too, can be found on nyc.gov/vetreports.
- Most erringly: One page says that our work “has not translated to consistent improvement of services, communication, or outreach.” Meanwhile, the most recent Mayor’s Management Report shows increases in each of the following metrics (when you compare the averages of FY 22 & 23 to FY 24 & 25):
 - Veterans and their families served by DVS: 345% increase, from an average of 2,203 Veterans and families served in FY 22 & 23 to an average of 9,811 served in FY 24 & 25.
 - Requests from Veterans and their families: 518% increase, from an average of 5,058 requests in FY 22 & 23 to an average of 31,262 requests in FY 24 & 25.
 - Public engagement events attended by DVS to promote Veteran resources: 48% increase, from an average of 196 events in FY 22 & 23 to an average of 291 events in FY 24 & 25.
 - Online site visits: 113% increase, from an average of 77,025 visits in FY 22 & 23 to an average of 163,870 visits in FY 24 & 25.
 - Homeless Veterans and their families who received housing through DVS’ Veteran Peer Coordinator Program: 59% increase, from an average of 88 who received housing in FY 22 & 23 to an average of 140 in FY 24 & 25.

I have said this before: if I am grading a student who has significantly improved their performance in key metrics, anywhere from a 48% increase to a 518% increase (518% is more than five-fold), while I can find flaws in anyone – including that student – it is difficult for me to say that the student’s grade should be a C. Apart from the less than 0.01% of the community’s comments (which excluded feedback from leadership of NYC’s largest Veteran Service Organizations), you have to do things positively in the fields of leadership, service delivery, collaboration, workforce development, digital governance, and knowledge management to

drive an organization towards an impactful place. We believe we are accomplishing that objective.

Now, there are pro-tips and findings worthy of being acknowledged in the scorecard—many of which, we will get to. I want to make sure that we do not accept every single word written in the document as gospel. Like human beings, these things are messy. It is important to separate the wheat from the chaff in determining what is key as we look to improve the delivery of services to Veterans in the City of New York.

To reconcile the findings of the report between what select respondents communicated and how we see things at DVS, the (at most) 21 respondents, in my opinion:

- Want DVS to be at maturity with its processes and systems *right now*;
- Want DVS to receive enhanced resources to perform its work *right now*; and
- Want DVS to fill the needs which can be seen in New York City’s Veteran community *right now*.

This is all understandable and acceptable. We agree to those challenges.

For DVS, we view things through the following lenses:

- How do we address current needs ...
 - While operating in a land of constraints, doing the best with what we have (this is in light of limited resources triggered by the 2020-2023 COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022-2025 New York City Migrant Crisis)?
 - Being mindful of our entire charter? Per Chapter 75 of the New York City Charter, the NYC Department of Veterans’ Services is tasked to assist and inform Veteran and Military Families in the areas of healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment.
 - While looking to empower *all Veterans*, not just those on one side of the bell curve?
- How do we galvanize partners such that the onus to serve our brothers and sisters (and their loved ones) does not fall on one entity, but on all of us – city, state, federal, public, private, nonprofit, from domains including, but not limited to: academia, industry, government, the philanthropic space, entrepreneurship, and finance?

- Most significantly, while addressing current needs (which can be seen), how do we build an agency that can respond to the three existential challenges facing our community (needs that are comparatively unseen)? Those existential challenges are:
 - a. A majority of Veterans do not self-identify. A reminder that the self-identification rate according to the VA in FY 23 was 34.3% nationwide, 29.8% in New York State, and 24.1% in New York City.
 - b. The VA does market its services. The FY 26 budget for the US Department of Veterans Affairs is \$441.3 billion. It is second only to the budget for the Defense Department. A line item specific to marketing appears nowhere in the VA's budget documents. For perspective: the VA's budget consists of five volumes with a total length of 1,588 pages. Not displaying a budget for marketing is a glaring *and intentional* error.
 - c. The Veteran population is declining. The VA projects an annual rate of decline of 1.82% nationally and 3.19% in New York State. Year over year Census data suggests a 4.83% annual rate of decline in New York City. We need to persuade current New York City Veterans to stay and transitioning Active Duty Service Members to live, learn, and work here.

Established on April 8th, 2016, DVS is nine years old. Our first three years of existence (2016-2019) centered on logistically establishing ourselves as a department and functioning primarily as a referral agency. The last six years (2020-2025) has seen the agency expand to become a referral *and services* institution.

Our approach over the past several years to address current and existential challenges has been:

- 1) Obtain Veteran data so that we can learn who our constituents are. We have worked to obtain Veteran information at the city, state, and federal levels. We also obtain Veteran contact information from our own events and core programming. DVS leads other states in collaborating to obtain Transitioning Service Member contact information from the Defense Department. This approach has enabled us to grow from having contact information for approximately 5,000 NYC Veterans in 2019 to more than 150,000 Veterans in 2025.
- 2) Build offerings that inspire Veterans and their loved ones to self-identify. Our direct services are housing, claims, and employment. We fill gaps not being filled in the existing ecosystem in each of those areas. Further, DVS continues to make referrals

where applicable – as we have always done. Synergies (that is, programs with partners where 1+1=3), new policies, and new laws passed are ways that we create new offerings, sharing the burden all around. Our hope: one of our many offerings is strong enough to draw each Veteran community member from darkness into the light. Examples of offerings that I am speaking of include, but are not limited to:

a. Healthcare:

- i. Veteran Feeding Program. Provides food-insecure Veterans with access to meals. (nyc.gov/vetfood)
- ii. Veteran Mental Health Coalition. A community of practice for mental health and social services professionals who currently and potentially will interact with military-connected New Yorkers. (nyc.gov/vetmentalhealth)

b. Housing (nyc.gov/vethousing):

- i. Mitchell Lama Veterans Preference Transparency. Now, Veterans can see how many people are using the Mitchell Lama Veterans Preference to be housed in each Mitchell Lama development. This organically evens out the Veterans preference wait lists for Mitchell Lama housing.
- ii. Hearing, Vision, and Mobility Units in Housing Connect. DVS and the VA can sign off verifying service-connected hearing, vision, and mobility disabilities for Veterans applying for disability set aside units in Housing Connect.
- iii. Housing Connect Veterans Preference. There now exists a Veterans preference in Housing Connect. Specifically, there is a ten percent preference for municipal employees and US Military Veterans.
- iv. VS Home Loan. A Veteran who is eligible for SONYMA in the New York City region (Westchester, Long Island and the five boroughs) needs to only provide one percent of the purchase price to purchase a house, condo, or co-op. SONYMA, through participating lenders – and, in some cases, the Hebrew Free Loan Society – provides financing to the Veteran household to cover the remaining balance; this includes closing costs. In New York City, a household with 1 or 2 people is eligible for SONYMA if their household income is \$194,400 or less. A household with three or more people is eligible for SONYMA if their household income is \$226,800 or less. (nyc.gov/homesforveterans)

c. Benefits:

- i. Vallone Veterans Initiative. A full-time Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Veteran Service Officer works out of each City Council Member's district office one day per month. (nyc.gov/vetvallone)

- ii. Mission: VetCheck. Volunteers call more than 15,000 Veterans per year to check in on them, thank them for their service, and make sure that they take advantage of their benefits and offerings. (nyc.gov/vetcheck)
 - d. Culture:
 - i. PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Program. DVS supports more than 25 community-led, hyper-local, wellness activities throughout New York City. Activities include, but are not limited to: chess, yoga, equine therapy, and pickleball. Each activity serves to normalize help-seeking behavior amongst Veteran and Military families. (nyc.gov/vetdwyer)
 - ii. Veteran Voices Project. A program which enables Veteran community members to record their oral histories and archive the recordings with the Municipal Archives and Library of Congress. (nyc.gov/vetvoices)
 - e. Education:
 - i. Veteran Tuition Award Program Expansion. As of this year, the scholarship provided by the State of New York to Veterans has been expanded to include combat and non-combat Veterans. (nyc.gov/vetstudents)
 - ii. Military Family Advocate Program. Department of Education principals identify representatives (one per school) to be trained by DVS and serve as a liaison for military-connected students, staff, and faculty. (nyc.gov/vetmfa)
 - f. Employment:
 - i. Vet Jobs. Vet Jobs is aggressive care coordination specific to job seekers. Vet Jobs assesses a job seeker, determines the best employment and / or workforce development option for them, then connects the person to said opportunity. In situations where no other provider is able to assist the Veteran, DVS steps in – providing direct support. This is often the case with Veteran community members who are applying for public sector jobs and / or those who need to navigate New York City and New York State Programs like NY HELPS, 55 a, 55 b, and 55 c. (nyc.gov/vetjobs)
 - ii. Veteran Business Leadership Association. An effort which provides Veteran business owners with professional mentorship, technical assistance, certification support, networking opportunities, and promotion through being featured in our map of Veteran and Military Spouse-owned businesses, nyc.gov/vetbizmap. (nyc.gov/vetbusiness)
- 3) Part of our approach to address existential challenges has been to continue refining our operations, processes, and core functions. There has been a great deal of growth since

DVS was first established in 2016. Back then (into our first three years), the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) effectively held our hands as we performed administrative duties such as payroll & timekeeping, human resources, information technology, fiscal operations, equal employment opportunity, legal, logistics, and compliance. Now, we do those things independently. From a process standpoint, key milestones that DVS has reached as of late are:

- a. The department is more active in processing City Council discretionary contracts. Starting in FY 27, all City Council discretionary awards for Veteran programs valued at \$25,000 or less will be processed by the Department of Veterans' Services.
- b. In FY 26, DVS changed technology partners for our online services platform, VetConnect NYC (nyc.gov/vetconnect). We now use a provider, Combined Arms, which is a for-us, by-us Veteran owned and operated organization. The new VetConnect platform more easily dovetails with DVS, client, and community needs. To that point: all DVS workflows and procedures specific to client services are being captured in VetConnect.
- c. The department will execute its first multi-year master agreement contract—complete with a list of winning vendors – to support the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Program (funding Dwyer providers) starting in FY 27.

To pan back: the charter for the agency tasks DVS to assist and inform Veteran and Military Families in the areas of healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment. Among other things, DVS has spent the past nine years building the agency and establishing offerings in each charter-mandated space. We deliver those offerings through either providing direct services (our direct services are housing, claims, and employment), making referrals, or collaborating with stakeholders to execute synergies. The meta strategy tied to our work is “connect, mobilize, empower.”

- Connect: We – DVS and the broader Veteran service ecosystem – learn who the NYC Veteran community is.
- Mobilize: The NYC Veteran community learns who we are and what we have to offer (once again, speaking beyond DVS; the “we” includes all who provide Veteran services, benefits, and support).
- Empower: *We serve them* (Veterans and their loved ones).

These three phases – connect, mobilize, empower – have overlap. Some portion of them is always occurring at the same time. That being said, the principal energy of the agency in its first

nine years has been focused on “connect” (in addition to being born). We are in a period of transition as DVS shifts its focus to “mobilize.” Veterans will learn who we are during “mobilize” because we now offer several things that can capture people’s attention and draw them into the light; they can then be served by us. Our offerings are rooted in access, affordability, and opportunity. We have spent years building an apparatus that can absorb what comes when getting to the future state of “empower.” Empower at 100% means that you have maximum self-identification coupled with maximum utilization of benefits coupled with best-in-class execution of partnerships. We have been focused like a laser on building an ecosystem capable of performing at this level.

For the scorecard on the Parks Department, the assessment team compared New York City to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis. In our space, because New York City is the only municipality with a Veterans’ Services *department* – not a commission, board, or an office – and we are home to so many Veterans, the best organizations to compare us to are state level departments of Veterans Services for states with comparable Veteran population sizes. Those are: Iowa (whose Department of Veterans Affairs is 47 years old), Connecticut (80 years old), New Mexico (22 years old), and Vermont (at least 107). For context, New York State’s DVS is 80.

When you look at those peers—and most states and territories—few are built to attack the three existential problems the way we are. Once again, the existential problems facing the Veteran community are: (1) low self-identification, (2) a lack of VA marketing, and (3) population decline.

Few departments position themselves to be proactive like us with an eye towards engaging *all Veterans*. The reason: there is a reluctance to innovate in the face of resource constraints. With partners, you can build a network that is able to receive an influx of Veteran service requests and resolve them as they come. Without partners, Veteran Service Agencies find themselves in chicken-versus-egg dynamic of “I don’t want to aggressively market Veteran benefits and services because I am incapable of addressing a massive number of requests if they arrive.”

Our posture at DVS is *both / and*. We market as we scale—so demand grows in step with capacity. We pair outreach with service readiness, then use what we learn from intake and fulfillment to tighten the loop. And we do it with partners so the system can absorb a surge, triage quickly, and keep faith with the people we bring in. Without that partner network, agencies become restrained. With it, you can create demand and meet it—responsibly. That is what it means for us to be on offense in helping Veterans and their families in New York City.

While addressing the needs of today, we are endeavoring to build an agency (and a broader Veteran support ecosystem) which will make it easier for Veterans to self-identify, live, learn, and thrive in the five boroughs decades from now – well into tomorrow.

And I want to repeat: we are doing all of these things in support of the future – and all New York City Veterans – while presently achieving more than three-fold growth in the number of Veterans and their families served, more than five-fold growth in the number of service requests we respond to, 48% growth in the number of public engagement events we attend (promoting Veteran resources), more than two-fold growth in the number of visits to the DVS website, and a 59% increase in the number of homeless Veterans and their families who receive housing through the DVS Veteran Peer Coordinator program.

Regarding the scorecard and our actions in response to its major critiques (things not already mentioned):

- The strategy for DVS – along with short, mid-term, and long-term goals -- now appears on the agency's website at nyc.gov/vetmission.
- The Master Digital Strategy Plan for DVS is posted on nyc.gov/vetmedia.
- The Data Sharing Policy for DVS is posted on nyc.gov/vetreports.
- A formal feedback form can now be found on nyc.gov/vetcontact.
- A greater degree of case-related details and a smarter grouping of client requests and descriptions is incorporated in the Combined Arms technology that now undergirds VetConnect NYC.
- During this fiscal year (FY 26), six positions were added to DVS' headcount which will implicitly increase the level of quality assurance and quality control from an internal checks and balances standpoint. Those positions are three coordinators who have been added to our Housing Support Services team and three who have been added to our Veteran Support Services team (also known as the VA Claims unit).
- During this fiscal year, two positions were added to DVS' headcount which will explicitly increase the level of quality assurance and quality control of our reporting and actions. Those positions are:
 - a. VetConnect NYC Coordinator. One person will oversee, help optimize, and internally evaluate the flow of all of our VetConnect services and referrals.
 - b. Senior Advisor for Operations. The Senior Advisor for Operations will provide command and control over the Housing Support Services team and the Veteran Support Services team. This will be an added layer of internal oversight, quality assurance and quality control. Leaders of the VSS and HSS units will report to the Senior Advisor for Ops.

- Since the scorecard was published in April 2025, DVS has executed agreements which allow us to share Veteran contact information – broken down to the district level – with all Community Boards, Borough Presidents, and City and State legislators in New York City. One by one, we are currently executing similar agreements with federal elected officials. There are several benefits to doing this. One to point out (which addresses a scorecard criticism): if all of us – DVS, Community Boards, Borough Presidents, City Council Members, State Assembly Members, State Senators, Congressmen, Senators, etcetera – send mailings to the Veterans in our catchment areas at least one time per year, then we will have significantly amplified the level of non-digital outreach to older Veterans in the community.

I have just mentioned key areas of feedback where we were able to respond. Key areas where we were not able to respond (or did not respond) are:

- Our Veteran Support Services team meets remotely and, when needed, in person physically with clients who are not able to meet during traditional business hours. This is a more efficient use of time and resources – one where we can flex to the Veteran, meeting them closer to where they are – as opposed to having members of our VSS team positioned in a stationary location on nights and weekends.
- DVS is unable to share its ideal number of employees; no agency can. We do not want to get in the way of or (without knowing) negatively impact delicate budget negotiations that are ongoing between the Mayor and City Council. These types of conversations transcend DVS and have ripple effects on other agencies and efforts. For that reason, it is above our level to explicitly weigh in on these matters when it comes to us. Recognizing these constraints, we endeavor to be as open and transparent as possible on all other Veteran Services-related issues. We pray that our participation in these Veterans Committee hearings, of which there are nine to eleven hearings per year (we attend all hearings from start to finish) provides Council Members and the public with an accurate depiction of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for our agency and New York City's Veteran community as a whole.
- The Department of Veterans' Services follows New York City Human Rights Law. As of 2017, the law prevents discrimination on the basis of being or having been a uniformed services member. This means that DVS as an employer cannot discriminate against someone for being a member of the uniformed services. Conversely, we cannot discriminate against someone for *not being* a member of the uniformed services. We hire the best person for each job. We promote our job openings to the Veteran

community, posting them in our weekly newsletter and sharing them with Veteran and military spouse focused workforce development partners. That said, these opportunities are also found on nyc.gov/jobs. That website, City Jobs, is the official portal for all who seek employment with the City of New York. All are welcome (and encouraged) to apply to work at DVS. For perspective, when looking at the number of Veteran employees at DVS compared to our authorized strength, 34% of our headcount as of this month is filled by Veterans (that is, 17 out of 50 positions). The next closest agency to DVS in this metric is the FDNY at 8.4%, followed by the Sanitation Department at 5%, followed by the NYPD at 4.8%, followed by the Department of Corrections at 4.7%. While 34% of DVS employees have served in the US Military, 25% of US Department of Veteran's Affairs employees have served in the armed forces as of September 2024 (based on the most recent available data). Seventy percent of the Veterans employed at DVS are Community Coordinators. Three of our employees, or six percent, are Military Spouses.

- As mentioned in the report, DVS holds annual Veteran summits, roundtables with specific groups (ie: Veteran street vendors, housing advocates, mental health providers, Hispanic Veterans, etc.), we attend community board meetings, we have a "Contact the Commissioner" page on the DVS website, we proctor a military community survey every 2-4 years, we participate in all NYC Veterans Advisory Board meetings, and we hold three to five community engagement sessions each year. For community engagement sessions, along with advertising the virtual sessions in our newsletter, on social media and the DVS website, we invite more than 240 community benefits organizations, more than 160 Veteran Service Organizations, and the staffs of all city, state, and federal legislative officials who represent New York City to attend. Separate from individual stakeholder meetings, we attended more than 300 public events in FY 25. The Council engaged 21 people about DVS. For the subset of those 21 respondents who have issues with the agency, there are several forums through which that feedback can be shared (including completing our newly-created feedback form which is located at nyc.gov/vetcontact). The NYC Veterans Advisory Board is an example of a group that had feedback about DVS operations which we responded to; the City Council hearing held on September 22nd, 2025 about the VAB illustrated our response (our memo responding to the 2024 Veterans Advisory Board Report can be found at nyc.gov/vetboard). If these advocates – and I do not believe I have seen all of the people referenced in the report attend City Council hearings (we do not know who they are) – do not want to meet with us, do not wish to engage DVS directly, and do not wish to attend DVS-connected activities (or other Veteran forums where they can provide feedback and we will be present), then we encourage them to continue communicating

with us through the Council. We have no issues if you choose to do it discreetly. We ask that you continue to be part of the conversation. To all who offered feedback to the agency through this scorecard: there is value in saying something. Thank you for what you did. Look no further than the developments that have arisen from this report to see that you have a voice.

Reflecting on all that is been said thus far, the long view (to me) ...

First: A child is a different person every six months. DVS – relatively a child in New York City government – is nine years old. We are a growing, learning, and self-correcting organization. Add to that: building programs where government is involved and there are resource constraints is a process. This is not to mention that a majority of our clients do not self-identify as Veterans. In growing to reach maturity, these things take time. For an advocate who took issue with something they saw from DVS at a specific moment at age three, we need to acknowledge that age three is not the same as age five which is not the same as seven which is not the same as nine or ten (or beyond). For those observing us, please ask the rhetorical questions: *Is DVS listening to feedback? Is the agency correcting itself? Are they improving?*

Second, in public service and in government, historically, there is a lag between when a policy innovation is executed and when it penetrates and is fully realized by those who would benefit from it. I think that is where we are right now. You will see a situation very soon where more Veterans come to us (“us” equals all in the Veteran services ecosystem) for help getting money from the VA, for access to Veterans affordable housing, and for life-changing employment & entrepreneurial opportunities – among other amenities. This is already happening in real time.

Viewing it from the outside, it is hard for some to distinguish a direct service from a referral from a synergy. Based on how things traditionally work, it is easy to say “all of this should – and likely is – being done by DVS” when, in actuality, we are executing a team approach. An outsider views these synergies and offerings and assumes “DVS is doing too much; they are spread too thin,” when, in reality, our partners are performing the heavy lifting.

Moreover, if all that we did was focus on the basics and not put these offerings together, then at best, we could increase New York City’s Veteran self-identification rate from 24.1% to the national average of 34.3% -- putting aside the issue of Veteran population decline. But we are not putting that issue aside. And we are not settling for 34.3%. Our goal is to punch *through* the target and reach 100% Veteran self-identification. As surely as a goal in the Veteran community is to bring the Veteran unemployment rate to zero, the Veteran suicide rate to zero, and the Veteran homeless population to zero, we will settle for nothing less when it comes to

the number of Veterans in New York City who *do not* self-identify. We want that number to be zero as well. This means that all Veterans will tell people that they have served. They will allow themselves to receive earned benefits, honors, and services. We are committed to accomplishing that goal. We are playing for the long term. We are coming for everybody.

To the Veterans: you committed to protect *all of us*. We commit to serve *all of you*.

We are so grateful to the Speaker and the Council for being on this journey with us. Despite some of our issues with the report, it means the world to us that you have dedicated these resources and time towards DVS being our best. It was an honor to us to be the first in this process.

As I said, any day when we are talking about Veterans is a good day.

A separate topic:

Recognizing that this is the end of the year – and the end of the administration’s term – for the record, things that the City Council has done well and things where (collectively) there can be improvement in the eyes of DVS follow:

The great things:

- Expanding the Veterans Advisory Board to include Veteran family members.
- Codifying VetConnect NYC.
- Passing Local Law 37, which includes Veteran-identifier questions on client-facing City forms.
- Creating the Vallone Veterans Initiative, which has a VFW-accredited Veteran Service Officer work in each Council Members’ District Office delivering services to their constituents once per month.
- Passing Intro 740 of 2024, the Cold War Veterans Property Tax Exemption, which will become law this month. Valued at \$10 million per year, this is the largest City investment into the Veteran community since the creation of DVS (it is larger than that).
- Growing DVS by 25% manpower-wise with the adopted FY 26 budget.
- The City Council Scorecard process.

Areas of improvement:

- To Council Members who have not done so yet, please reach out to DVS or the Council Connect team to obtain contact information for the Veterans in your district.
- Ask the Local Law 37 questions on constituent intake forms at your district offices. Those questions are (paraphrasing):
 - a. Have you or a member of your household ever served in the US Armed Forces?*
 - b. If so, then do you consent to being contacted by DVS?*
- Formally add Veteran representation to the Street Vendor Advisory Board.
- Codify the Veteran Business Leadership Association.
- Increase Council discretionary funding to Veteran-serving nonprofits. With the exception of the Vallone Veterans Initiative (which we are eternally grateful for), there was no increase to the level of Schedule C funding disbursed in the field of Veterans Services from FY 23 through FY 26.
- Have all groups that receive City tax levy dollars to serve Veterans communicate with DVS so that, at a minimum, we can work with them to enhance their outreach. Beyond that, we can also provide those who need it with military cultural competency training and other support.
- For the few City Council district offices that have not yet scheduled recurring office hours with the VFW in support of the Vallone Veterans Initiative, please do so.

Lastly, I want to thank the Veterans Committee of the City Council for its service.

Acknowledging Committee Members - Chair Robert Holden, Council Member Kristy Marmorato, Council Member Vickie Paladino, Council Member Joann Ariola, Council Member Sandy Nurse, and Council Member Simcha Felder: Thank you for your leadership!

To the departing members - Chair Holden and Council Member Marmorato: Thank you for your service. This is not goodbye. Once a member of the Veteran community, always a member. Please continue to contribute to the conversation about what we can do to help US Military Service Members – past and present – along with their caregivers, survivors, and families.

Finally, the NYC Department of Veterans' Services can be reached via telephone at 212-416-5250, email at connect@veterans.nyc.gov, online at nyc.gov/vets, and through social media using the handle @nycveterans.

God Bless You, God Bless the City of New York, and God Bless America.

Thank you.