

# **NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD 2024 ANNUAL REPORT**



*Photo Credit: <https://www.nyit.edu/events/veterans-day-parade-2024/>*

## **NEW YORK CITY VETERANS' ACHIEVEMENTS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

*“Those who love peace most are those who serve in the Armed Forces and whose lives would be lost first if conflict occurs.” – **President Jimmy Carter***

Veterans Crisis Line (Dial 988, press 1)

The Crisis Line, mandated by the Joshua Omvig Veteran Suicide Prevention Act of 2007, provides immediate support to veterans, service members and their families.



# NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD

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**To:** Mayor Eric Adams  
Deputy Mayor Suzanne Miles-Gustave, Esq.  
NYC Council Speaker Adrienne E. Adams  
Councilmember Robert Holden, Chair, Veterans Committee NYC Council

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Mayor Adams and Council Speaker Adams,

Submitted for your review is the New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) end of the year report for 2024.

This report highlights the culmination of progress and concerns veterans shared over five sessions through the NYC Veterans Advisory Board Public Hearings, held in each Borough. These sessions provided our city's veterans with a voice to express their concerns, provide input regarding issues impacting the veteran community, present resources available to our veterans and provide feedback to the board and our elected officials on areas of improvement the city currently provides.

This report includes the dates for the public sessions for 2025, held on a hybrid platform to allow maximum attendance from our constituents. In 2024, our in-person sessions were held at American Legion and VFW posts, as well as the Barclay's Center and the University of Mount Saint Vincent. This allowed for greater visibility and understanding of the Veterans Advisory Board coupled with broadening the outreach to all veterans.

This report also shares the recommendations of the board to those elected officials governing our city's veterans and to the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS).

Finally, we are submitting as an addendum to our report the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) annual report. We are submitting this document in the interest of transparency with the community.

Thank you for your attention to the veterans of New York City. The Veterans Advisory Board stands ready to work with you to improve the quality and level of services for all New Yorkers, especially our veterans and their families. Please direct any questions or concerns to my email at: [MEliasVABNYC@gmail.com](mailto:MEliasVABNYC@gmail.com).

Mercedes Elias  
Chair

## NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

As of December 31, 2024, three of eleven board members have completed their term on the board, two Council appointments have expired terms and one appointment for a spouse, caregiver, and/or Gold Star family member remains unfilled. In 2024, we welcomed three new board members appointed by the Mayor and the City Council.

Board Member	Borough	Email (@gmail.com)	Term Expires	Appointment
Mercedes Elias Chair	Queens	MEliasVABNYC	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Ryan Graham Vice Chair	Queens	ryansgrah	August 2, 2026	Council
Wendy McClinton	Brooklyn	WMcClintonVABNYC	June 4, 2021	Council
Paul Dietrich	Staten Island	PDietrichVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Mayor
John Rowan	Queens	JRowanVABNYC	November 19, 2021	Council
Andrew Walcott	Brooklyn	AWalcottVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Mayor
Linda Ollis	Staten Island	LOllisVABNYC	May 9, 2025	Mayor
Marisa Estrella	Bronx	worldwideveteransrd	August 22, 2026	Mayor
Brendan Gibbons	Queens	BrendanGibbonsNYCVAB	August 1, 2026	Council
Diego Rubio	Manhattan	Diegorrubio	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Josh Sooklal	Manhattan	JSooklalVABNYC	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Ashton Stewart	Manhattan	ashstewa@mjhs.org	October 27, 2027	Council

## Outgoing Board Members

We are extremely grateful to the three board members below who completed their term during the year and thank them for their contributions and service to the veterans of New York City.

Todd Haskins	Manhattan	THaskinsVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Mayor
Jennifer Kamrowski	Manhattan	JKamrowskiVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Mayor
Patricia LaBorda	Bronx	Patricia.laborda	<i>Term Completed</i>	Council

## LOCAL VETERAN POLICIES AND RESOURCES

In 2024, the VAB streamlined the focus of the public sessions to ensure we highlighted the charter areas established for DVS: Housing, Healthcare, Education, Employment and Culture. This allowed DVS to adhere to its mission to connect, mobilize and empower New York City's Veteran community in order to foster purpose-driven lives for US Military Service Members – past and present – in addition to their caregivers, survivors and families.

### Why Should the City Support its Veterans?

We believe that New York City, in conjunction with non-profits and the private sector, have a moral and economic imperative to support our veterans. New York City benefits from the following investments:

**Freedom and Security:** All residents of New York City benefit from the freedom and security provided by our armed forces. The Federal Hall National Memorial reminds us of the observation of our first President, George Washington who noted that *“the willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by our nation.”* To ensure our continued prosperity, it is critical we support those who have served.

**Federal Spending and Tourism:** New York City benefits from federal spending and tourism. Activities such as the annual Fleet Week, July 4<sup>th</sup> Celebration, New York City Veterans' Day Parade, the Intrepid Sea Air and Space Museum, and the Canyon of Heroes all are connected to our nation's military veterans and produce significant commerce. As the economic capital of the world, many Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and veteran-focused non-profits also host events here, which adds to the commerce and culture of the city.

**Veterans Make Great Citizens:** Veterans and their families are this country's greatest renewable resource and attracting them to New York City supports our continued success. Veterans tend to have higher earnings and lower unemployment than non-veterans once their transition is complete. Veterans also tend to be more civically active and have lower incarceration rates than non-veterans.

These moral and economic imperatives provide a good rationale for investment in good, local veteran policies and programs, particularly since many of these provide a direct and positive economic return for New York City. Wherever possible, the city should seek programs that reinforce and support veterans and their families

## SUMMARY OF VAB ACTIONS OF IN 2024 AND PLANS FOR 2025

**Below is a summary of the key activities for 2024:**

**Conducted Meetings in Every NYC Borough:** We continued to hold our public sessions via a hybrid format, allowing participants to meet with the board and DVS representatives in public and virtually to ensure they are able to voice their concerns. We continue to see a higher level of attendance virtually than in in-person meetings held prior to the pandemic.

**2025 Meeting Schedule:** We have scheduled the 2025 VAB meetings on the following dates. All meetings will be held in a hybrid format, with options to attend in person or virtually.

Date	Borough	Charter Area
Wed Feb 26	Manhattan	Benefits
Wed April 30	Queens	Housing
Wed June 11	Staten Island	Healthcare
Wed Aug 27	Bronx	Education
Wed Oct 29	Brooklyn	Employment

**Engaged with DVS, City Council, and the Veteran Community on Strategic Priorities and Policies Relating to Veterans in New York City:** The VAB actively engaged with all three of its key stakeholders to help prioritize resources and raise issues. This included meetings with elected officials as well as members of the veteran community. Members of the VAB increased participation at city council veteran committee hearings to ensure that the needs of the community were presented to council members.

**Ongoing Objectives:** A key objective again for 2025 will be to have DVS continue to develop metrics for actions taken beyond intake for veterans requesting services and establishing key performance indicators to support various initiatives. Additionally, a “feedback loop” for referrals to indicate that a veteran who is referred to DVS should be implemented so those who refer a veteran know the veteran was contacted within the limits of privacy concerns. This will inform the public and support the administration in its efforts to allocate resources to the most effective programs. We will continue to work collaboratively with DVS staff to ensure that our strategic initiatives are aligned and that all parties receive the necessary information and support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL

Our recommendations are made to increase the efficiency of the Department of Veterans' Services as well as address issues brought to our attention by constituents, based on feedback received during our town hall meetings.

### **Processing of PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans' Support Program Grants**

The Dwyer program is funded in the NY state budget to help veterans cope with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). In 2024, the program was made available through DVS and experienced a significant delay in approval and reimbursement of funds. This delay has caused a severe delay in services available to our service members. We believe this is due to a process error, having applications and funding starting from the NYS Office of Mental Health (OMH) to NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) to DVS. Extra time is taken for the DOHMH to approve the funds to be transferred to DVS. Once the funds transfer is approved, the Mayor's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) officially transfers the funds to DVS. There have been significant delays when processing the funds, therefore we recommend a review of the current grant and procurement process to ensure the funds are distributed in a timely manner.

### **Appointment Terms to the Veterans Advisory Board**

Members assigned to serve on the VAB do so at will, and by appointment of the Mayor or City Council. Currently, there is no consistency with board appointment terms. The current ByLaws state that a member appointed to fill a vacancy shall serve for the balance of the unexpired term, however some appointments are made for three-year terms as of the date of the appointment, while others are only for a period of time remaining on a previous board member's three-year term to cover the gap. This has resulted in increased turnover on the board, with delays on renewals for members who were only assigned to cover the remainder of a previous board member's term. We recommend that both the Mayor and City Council office of appointments assign a term of three years for each new assignment and that this is appropriately annotated in revised ByLaws. This will ensure continuity of participation on the board. In addition to this, it is imperative that the Mayor and City Council review the backgrounds of the members of the VAB to ensure we have accurate representation across all five boroughs, as there have been issues with representatives more heavily represented in one borough compared to others.

- **Recommend Adding Requirement for Board Members Attendance at Public Sessions.** Similar to the requirement for members of the City Council to attend a minimum number of meetings each year (see here: <https://council.nyc.gov/procedures-governing-member-and-public-remote-attendance/>), we believe this requirement should also be codified and implemented for members of the VAB. This ensures active participation by the members. We recommend VAB members be required to attend a minimum of

three out of the five of the public sessions, either virtually or in-person, with a mandatory requirement to attend the in-person meeting for the borough they represent. Similar to the previous recommendation on appointments, this will ensure continuity, participation and active engagement between the administration, New York City Council, DVS and the veteran's community. When incorporated, the VAB leadership will report those VAB members who have not met the requirement to the Mayor and City Council with the recommendation to be removed and replaced on the board.

### **Invest in Resources to Encourage and Support Veteran Engagement in the**

**Political Process:** Consistent with our guiding principle of supporting veterans' continued service as citizens, DVS has frequently briefed the opportunity for veterans to sit on their local community boards. We recommend that members of the city council work with city officials to help recruit veterans to sit on their local community boards and engage in active participation with the political process at all levels. There has been significant improvements to ensure communication is disseminated regarding City Council Veterans Committee hearings on issues impacting veterans. This is a combined effort, with DVS pushing out information via their social media channels and staff within City Council ensuring local leaders are notified of upcoming hearings. This allows veterans to have a voice regarding hearings impacting our community and continued engagement will reinforce the commitment by our elected leaders to support the veteran community.

### **Increased Funding for DVS**

Our vision statement includes reference to **effective** local veteran policies, and we are committed to recommending policies and programs focused on veterans and their families. To accomplish this, we believe DVS must be provided with appropriate resources. DVS remains the smallest department in the city, operating with less than one percent of the City budget. The authorized FY 25 headcount for DVS is 39, and the next largest department is 136, with the largest department in NYC at 48,876. However, in the past 9 years of its existence it has increased the number of services to its constituents, including housing, mental health, education and employment issues amongst others. Increased funding would allow the agency to:

- **Scale operations:** In order for the department to scale their operations and develop sustainable long-term goals, their budget must also be increased to meet the demands of the veterans currently residing in NYC and those returning after their time in service. Additional funding will also allow DVS to directly provide services to veterans as opposed to referring them to other city agencies, non-profit partners, and community-based organizations which currently fill resource and service gaps.
- **Provide non-digital support services:** Currently, 53% of NYC's veteran population is over the age of 64, therefore the current means for communication via social media and digital communication is not ideal for this demographic. DVS



provides assistance within each borough via their Veteran Resource Centers, however, due to their limited staff they are only able to provide limited days and hours for accessibility. Increased funding will allow greater accessibility for veterans employed full-time to ensure that services are provided and information on the city's resources are appropriately disseminated. In addition, additional funding would support communication outreach in the form of radio ads, print communications, and targeted newsletters for older populations.

- **Evaluation and documentation of programming:** In order to ensure trust with our community and full transparency, we call upon the administration and the City Council to provide proper funding specifically dedicated to evaluating and documenting programs including:
  - o **Document benefits and efficiency:** To have the most effective programs, there must be documentation to allow the board to prove that DVS has been good stewards of resources, and this in turn will attract additional State and Federal resources. Further, documentation, including audits from the New York City Comptroller's office, will highlight the value that these programs provide to all New Yorkers. Data collection and the interpretation of this data requires additional resources. We believe that these resources will help DVS to increase their transparency with both the VAB and the community at large.
  - o **Tracking veteran intake requests:** During many of the public sessions, veterans commented that outreach to DVS had been done without contact or follow up. DVS "VetConnectNYC" portal has changed service providers within the last year and the new system has not been implemented as it is still being built. Therefore, it is imperative that appropriate tracking mechanisms are in place to ensure requests are being logged and follow up is occurring even though no platform is in place while DVS awaits the new system. The board requests that all processes concerning cases for veterans who contact DVS be documented to ensure adequate services are provided. The VetConnectNYC tracking system needs an appropriate level of funding to ensure it has a sufficient amount of physical and digital infrastructure required for the amount of data that will be processed in the system.

**Increase Veteran Vendors' Inclusion on the Street Vendor Advisory Board:** Street vending is New York City's oldest entrepreneurial venture for veterans going back to 1894 when New York State legislators enacted state laws promising wounded Civil War veterans could make a living as street peddlers. This was a promise made to veterans by a grateful State and historically remains deeply rooted in the NYC veteran community. As workers return to offices, veterans who own and operate street carts have had a difficult time operating and maintaining their vendor's license. As in 2022, we continue to recommend the creation of an avenue other than the VAB for veteran

street vendors to voice their concerns and issues, as they are a unique subsection of the vendor's population. We continue to recommend a formal seat for a veteran on the Street Vendor Advisory Board. This would affirm the city's commitment to its veterans, while at the same time continuing to support these veteran entrepreneurs. (Of note, Veterans Committee Chair Robert Holden has introduced bill 0686-2024 to resolve this, status on that is listed further in this report.)

**Funding and Resources for Student Veterans:** As we've consistently stated, the GI Bill and the stipend tied to it brings a significant amount of Federal money into the city (an estimated \$250k per student who completes their education). Private institutions have achieved a high amount of success in recruiting veterans and providing support services. The same cannot be said for all the institutions within the CUNY school system. John Jay, Queens College, Lehman and The College of Staten Island's student veteran support services should be utilized as a template for other programs within the CUNY system. We believe that by providing an equal level of support across the CUNY system, NYC can attract more student veterans to not only learn from but eventually become employed post-graduation. Another barrier to students wanting to pursue higher education within NYC is the cost of living associated, specifically for public institutions that do not provide student housing. We recommend innovative housing solutions for the students attending these institutions in order to attract and retain more student veterans.

**Veteran Treatment Courts:** Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) are now established in each of the five boroughs, and we believe these are great programs for both veterans and taxpayers. According to the Vera Institute of Justice, the average cost to incarcerate a prisoner in the State of New York is \$115,000, with the full annual cost of incarcerating one person in New York City is \$556,539. Further, as of the first three years of existence, the Buffalo Veteran Treatment Court has a 0% recidivism rate. While we would not expect that to be sustained, it has clearly been more successful than other specialized courts. The positive feedback of VTCs is that after the veteran completes court mandated treatment, they leave with a clean slate. Anyone who wants to volunteer with VTCs is welcome. The volunteers assist with the treatment of the Veterans using their skill set to ensure their needs are met.

Regarding VTCs, we recommend the following three actions:

- ✓ Eligibility for all veterans. Each Veteran Treatment Court in NYC sets its own eligibility standards, and there are some VTCs whom do not serve all veterans. Treatment through a VTC is based on the Veteran's military discharge. We recommend that all veterans, regardless of discharge status, be eligible to use the VTCs.
- ✓ Consistency across all VTCs. The Veteran's Treatment courts are governed at the discretion of the Judge and the local District Attorney, who determine how the Treatment Court will operate and what the policies will be. We recommend a

uniform approach to VTC training and operations and policies in New York City.

· Education on Veteran Resources. There must be knowledgeable Judges and staff that are familiar with the various veteran programs and services in NYC. We recommend that DVS work with the VA's Veteran Justice Program to conduct training for personnel who work with the VTCs to ensure they are culturally competent and aware of all resources available. It is critical that funding be made available to nonprofits which recruit, train and support Veteran Treatment Court mentors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO DVS

**Codify the responsibilities of DVS and VAB.** Since the establishment of the VAB, the roles between the agency and the board have evolved. As such, it is imperative that the responsibilities of both entities need to be codified, to ensure all parties are cognizant of expectations going forward. We believe this can be accomplished through a revision of the By Laws for the VAB, clearly establishing the responsibilities and expectations between DVS and the VAB, including but not limited to:

- Updating the recent approval of additional board members
- Updating information on the DVS website in a timely manner
- Updating assignment requirements and terms for VAB members
- Identifying the location of public hearings
- Controlling technology requirements for public hearings
- Establishing the VAB as the NYC Community Veteran Engagement Board (CVEB)

In formally establishing this, we hope to ensure both parties can continue to work together to focus on the needs of the veterans in New York City.

**Providing Personnel Support for the VAB:** This has been a continued unresolved issue, with no successful resolution based on prior year's recommendations. Routine administrative items such as calendar coordination for the VAB executive sessions, information dissemination on public sessions, and updating the DVS website are a few examples of service provided by personnel directly assigned to the VAB. The current method of having a VA work study intern provide administrative assistance has been challenging and an intern has not been identified. Overarching, we are requesting administrative support to the VAB be worked into future legislation to ensure continuity of support and communication with DVS. Prior to any future legislation, we would like the support services provided by DVS to be detailed (i.e. what equipment, assets, etc.) to reduce the conflict of responsibilities between DVS and the VAB. Part of this support includes managing technology requirements for meetings to not only record our virtual meetings but also to maintain control over public sessions by muting participants, reviewing chats, etc. Short of legislation, we believe this can be rectified through the aforementioned DVS/VAB agreement on roles and responsibilities for public sessions.

### **Documented Tracking on Progress from Previous Recommendations**

To ensure that the agency is serving as good stewards of the funds allocated towards veterans, numerous issues were frequently raised during the public sessions which we feel requires specific reporting:

**Claims Processing:** Navigating the Federal VA bureaucracy to access benefits for which a veteran qualifies is difficult. During 2024, DVS appointed a full-time employee to run the claims team. These representatives provide direct assistance to veterans by helping them complete and file their VA disability claims. This critical role not only supports veterans in their efforts to receive the

benefits they have earned, but it also has the potential to contribute millions of dollars in federal benefits to the New York City economy. During our public session, it was brought to our attention that there has been a backlog of applications for assistance when the team was established. The team has had a full year to obtain metrics to track the success of their program. ***We recommend that detailed metrics regarding the number of submissions, approvals, and financial impact to the city be tracked to ensure the efficiency and success of the program.***

**Discretionary Contracting Capability at DVS:** One of the most fundamental aspects of a city agency is having direct control over contracting resources and this has been a top priority of the VAB for each of the past six years. In February 2023, DVS was granted the ability to approve discretionary contracts of \$20,000 or less based on veterans' initiatives. Throughout 2023, DVS worked to establish a process for submissions, review, and approvals of these discretionary contracts. ***A detailed review of this process is requested to validate that those organizations seeking Council discretionary funding are able to receive these monies in a timely manner and to identify any issues with approval or processing. In addition, an assessment as to the value gained from the service provided for the contract should also be taken into account.***

## LEGISLATION AND PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

### PENDING LEGISLATION FOR APPROVAL

Many of the items listed below are previous recommendations made which have had action taken to *introduce* the items via the appropriate channels yet have still not been approved. The listed items below are significant measures which, when approved, would show meaningful support from our elected officials to address the needs of the veteran community.

#### **Establish a Preference for New York City to Contract with Veteran-Owned**

**Businesses:** Federal and State governments and as well as most large businesses have a preference for contracting for Veteran-owned businesses, and yet New York City does not offer such a preference. New York City has an existing infrastructure for the MWBE programs, and these efforts should be expanded to veteran-owned businesses. For many years the VAB has recommended that a contracting preference be offered for Veteran owned businesses by the city as is done at the Federal and State level as well as a large portion of larger corporations.

- ***Actions taken:*** Council member Robert F. Holden, Chair of the Veterans Committee filed Intro. 0685-2024 on March 19, 2024. There is now a Veteran identification question in the Payee Information Portal. The more pertinent issue for this bill would be to codify the Veteran Leadership Advisory Council (currently known as the Veteran Business Leadership Association within DVS) to educate veteran owned business enterprises about City procurement opportunities and support such business enterprises during the procurement process. Codification would ensure this committee across administrations. (<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6584152&GUID=ADF08D77-9D73-4C7A-B85E-608F9B5D2323&Options=&Search=#:~:text=The%20New%20York%20City%20Council%20%2D%20File%20%23%3A%20Int%200685%2D2024&text=Summary%3A,do%20business%20with%20the%20City.>)

**Supporting Veteran Vendors:** New York City has a tradition of supporting veterans interested in operating as street vendors going back to the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. To ensure that veterans who choose to vend excel, DVS should, in conjunction with other agencies and with input from current veteran vendors, develop a training program to ensure that veterans are educated on the regulations and can ply their craft with professionalism. DVS should also partner with private industry to create programs for veterans to finance and acquire equipment that will support their success. Further, NYC's Department of Consumer and Workers Protection (DCWP) & Health Department should give due consideration to veteran status in awarding licenses.

- ***Actions taken:*** Council member Robert F. Holden, Chair of the Veterans Committee re-introduced and filed Intro. 0686-2024, bills which would

amend the membership of the Street Vendor Advisory Board to include the Commissioner of Veterans' Services or their designee, and to increase the number of Speaker-appointed members to 7, to include a representative of the veteran community. This bill would also require the Department of Veterans' Services to post on its website information related to resources and support for veteran vendors.

(<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6584147&GUID=199CD7BA-3C5A-43F5-AFD3-756EC1A65172&Options=&Search=>)

- CM Holden also reintroduced Intro. 0687-2024 to amend the administrative code of New York to waive the \$200 annual permit fees for mobile food unit commissaries that reserve space for veteran vendors. (<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6584146&GUID=00C36323-C975-4D46-81AD-9BF5F112FFFA&Options=&Search=>)
- **Status:** Currently, both of these bills are being Laid over by Committee. Our veteran vendors have continued to have a significant presence during our public sessions and we urge the council to consider the above bills to show support of our veteran vendors. We recommend a City Council hearing specifically on the subject of Veteran Street Vendors, with stakeholders, City Council members, representatives from the administration and the Mayor.

**Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans:** In 2008, New York State passed a law allowing New York localities to implement a property tax exemption for those veterans who served during the Cold War – September 2, 1945, to December 24, 1991. To date, New York City has not passed this exemption. We believe this exemption would allow veterans to continue to stay in the city rather than be forced out. **We recommend the Council support and pass this legislation.**

- **Actions taken:** This bill has been re-introduced by Councilmember David Carr (intro. 0740-2024), a local law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to establishing a real property tax exemption for Cold War veterans. This local law would establish a real property tax exemption for Cold War veterans, defined as someone who served on active duty in the United States armed forces for some period between September 2, 1945 and December 26, 1991 and was honorably discharged or released. The exemption would apply to the veteran's primary residence, or to the primary residence of the unmarried surviving spouse of the veteran, to the extent that the residence is being used for residential purposes. The exemption would be for 15 percent of the assessed value of the residential property, up to \$39,000, and would last for 10 years. Cold War veterans who were disabled as a result of their service would be eligible for an additional exemption, up to \$130,000.

(<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6632242&GUID=86AD5EBB-5A32-4164-88A4-293ED766EFF5&Options=&Search=>)



James W. Hendon  
COMMISSIONER

Glenda Y. Villareal  
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

December 31, 2024

To the Chair of the Veterans' Advisory Board,

As we reflect on the progress and initiatives of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) in 2024, I am filled with immense pride in our accomplishments and the continuous strides we are making to support our veterans and their families.

This past year has been particularly significant. We have expanded our efforts to honor and support our veteran community through a diverse range of programs and initiatives. A major milestone was the advancement of the Post-9/11 Fallen Service Member Memorial in Whitestone, Queens. In collaboration with the Department of Cultural Affairs and the memorial advisory committee, DVS announced a shortlist of artists to design this tribute to the 7,064 U.S. service members who sacrificed their lives in Overseas Contingency Operations, including nearly 100 from New York City.

DVS has also played a key role on the national stage, participating in the 17th Annual SVA NatCon in Colorado and the NASDVA Midwinter Conference, where we fostered collaboration and best practices in veteran services. Our sponsorship of 14 CUNY veterans to attend the SVA NatCon, with support from AT&T, provided student veterans with invaluable networking and professional development opportunities.

In September, DVS joined the United War Veterans Council to announce U.S. Marine Corps veteran Dakota Meyer as the grand marshal for the 2024 NYC Veterans Day Parade. This event, hosted aboard the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, underscored our commitment to honoring and celebrating the service of our veterans.

DVS continued its commitment to veteran well-being through various impactful programs. We expanded the Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, launching a new initiative to provide peer mentorship and support groups. We also led the Veterans Feeding Veterans Initiative, a public-private partnership that distributed over 3,000 meal kits and 1,300 turkeys during Thanksgiving, with a projection to distribute over 50,000 meal kits by the end of the year, addressing food insecurity among veterans and military families across NYC.

The success of the Greater NYC Military and Veteran Family Transition Summit at Yankee Stadium and the NYM Transitioning Service Members Summit at Citi Field provided veterans and their families with critical resources in employment, housing, wellness, and finance. These events reflect our unwavering dedication to ensuring a seamless transition for veterans into civilian life.

Additionally, DVS played a pivotal role in advocating for and supporting the expansion of the Veterans Tuition Award (VTAP), which now ensures eligibility for all veterans who have served at least four years,

Connect with us!



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COMMISSIONER

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regardless of combat status. This expansion broadens access to higher education and empowers veterans to pursue rewarding post-military careers.

Throughout 2024, DVS remained committed to community engagement, hosting quarterly virtual sessions addressing key issues such as housing, benefits and burials, mental health, and VA claims. We also continued our efforts through Mission: VetCheck, making over 10,000 supportive check-in calls to veterans across NYC to connect them with essential resources.

As we look ahead to 2025, DVS remains steadfast in its mission to enhance services for New York City veterans. We will continue working towards fostering economic empowerment, ensuring access to essential benefits, and creating meaningful opportunities for veterans and their families.

Thank you for your continued support and trust in our mission. To aid you with your 2024 annual report, I am writing to share highlights from our agency's accomplishments over the last year.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JWH", written over a light blue horizontal line.

James Hendon  
Commissioner  
New York City Department of Veterans' Services

## **Overview of DVS Accomplishments: 2024**

### **Advancing the Post-9/11 Fallen Service Member Memorial**

In collaboration with the Department of Cultural Affairs and the memorial advisory committee, DVS announced a shortlist of artists to design the Post-9/11 Fallen Service Member Memorial in Whitestone, Queens. This monument will honor the 7,064 U.S. Service Members who sacrificed their lives in Overseas Contingency Operations, including nearly 100 from New York City, serving as a lasting tribute and a place of reflection for all New Yorkers.

### **Participating in Key National and State-Level Conferences**

DVS attended the 17th Annual SVA NatCon in Colorado, where agency leadership spoke on a panel encouraging transitioning veterans to choose NYC as their destination to live, learn, and work. Additionally, DVS sponsored 14 CUNY veterans to attend the conference with support from AT&T, providing these student veterans with valuable networking and professional development opportunities. DVS also joined the NASDVA Midwinter Conference, fostering communication and collaboration with Veterans Services leaders nationwide to promote best practices and advocacy for veterans and their families.

### **Grand Marshal Announcement for the 2024 NYC Veterans Day Parade**

On September 20, DVS joined the United War Veterans Council to announce U.S. Marine Corps veteran Dakota Meyer as the grand marshal for the 2024 NYC Veterans Day Parade. The event, held aboard the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum, celebrated Meyer's contributions and highlighted the parade's ongoing commitment to honoring veterans.

### **Honoring Vietnam Veterans on Vietnam Veterans Day**

In March, DVS hosted Vietnam Veterans Day ceremonies in partnership with the United War Veterans Council. Events included a wreath-laying ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, recognizing the 50th anniversary of the day, followed by a private gathering for veterans and community members.

### **Hosting the Greater NYC Military and Veteran Family Transition Summit**

DVS hosted the inaugural Greater NYC Military and Veteran Family Transition Summit at Yankee Stadium in September, in partnership with Craig Newmark New York Tri-State Blue Star Families Chapter and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Earlier in the year, DVS also held the NYM Transitioning Service Members Summit at Citi Field. Both events provided veterans and their families with critical resources on employment, housing, wellness, and finance.

## **Expanding the Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program**

To combat veteran isolation and promote emotional wellness, DVS solicited proposals for the Private First-Class Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program. The program, set to launch in 2025, will provide peer mentorship and support groups, fostering connection and shared experiences among NYC veterans.

## **Expanding the Veterans Tuition Award (VTAP)**

DVS collaborated with New York State to support the passage of legislation (S.8596-A/A.9205-A) expanding the Veterans Tuition Award (VTAP). This landmark policy now ensures all veterans who served for at least four years are eligible, regardless of combat service. The expansion broadens access to higher education, empowering more veterans to pursue rewarding post-military career paths.

## **Combating Food Insecurity Through the Veterans Feeding Veterans Initiative**

Through a public-private partnership with HelloFresh, The Campaign Against Hunger, and Amazon affiliates, DVS distributed over 3,000 meal kits and 1,300 turkeys during Thanksgiving. By the end of 2024, the program is projected to distribute over 50,000 meal kits, addressing food insecurity among veterans and military families across NYC.

## **Celebrating Fleet Week and the Army Birthday**

DVS participated in the annual Fleet Week New York festivities, including a kickoff breakfast with the Secretary of the Navy and city officials, the Parade of Ships, and wreath-laying ceremonies aboard the Intrepid. In June, DVS also celebrated the 249th Army Birthday, with ceremonial events honoring the Army's history and contributions.

## **National Night Out**

On August 6, 2024, DVS joined local precincts across NYC for National Night Out, a community-building campaign that fosters neighborhood safety and police-community partnerships. The event highlighted DVS's ongoing commitment to connecting veterans and their families with critical resources while strengthening community ties.

## **Mission: VetCheck**

Over the summer, DVS relaunched Mission: VetCheck in partnership with New York Cares, making over 10,000 supportive check-in calls to veterans across NYC. These calls connected veterans with essential resources, including free meals, housing assistance, employment opportunities, and mental health services. The initiative underscored the city's gratitude for its veterans while addressing critical needs within the community.

## **Quarterly Virtual Community Engagement Sessions**

DVS hosted quarterly virtual community engagement sessions to address key issues affecting NYC veterans. Each session focused on a specific topic: housing, benefits and burials, mental health, and VA claims. These forums provided direct access to resources, information, and experts, empowering veterans and their families.

## **Bringing Services Directly to Veterans with Resource Pop-Ups**

DVS partnered with NYC Health + Hospitals and City Council members to organize veteran resource pop-ups across several districts. These events brought services directly to veterans, connecting them with benefits specialists, mental health providers, and other essential resources within their communities.

## **Veterans Month**

Throughout November, DVS participated in numerous events to honor NYC's veteran community, including the Mayor's Veterans Day Breakfast and the NYC Veterans Day Parade. Highlights included the Veterans Labor Union Breakfast, celebrating the contributions of veterans within NYC labor unions. DVS also collaborated with organizations citywide to host resource fairs, panel discussions, and other events celebrating veterans and their families.

## **Relaunching the Veteran Business Leadership Association (VBLA)**

DVS relaunched the Veteran Business Leadership Association (VBLA), a consortium of partnerships spanning the public and private sectors. Collaborators include NYC Small Business Services, LaGuardia APEX Accelerator, the Bunker Labs Ambassador Program, and JP Morgan Chase. Together, these partners aim to support veteran small business owners and entrepreneurs across the five boroughs. The VBLA offers a wide range of services, including one-on-one counseling, coaching and mentorship, M/WBE certification assistance, access to capital and financing, and marketing strategy development.

## **Military Family Advocate Program and Staten Island Family Fair**

DVS partnered with NYC Public Schools to enhance support for military families through the Military Family Advocate Program. This initiative provided military cultural competency training for educators and resources for military-connected families. The program culminated with a Military and Veteran Family Fair on Staten Island at the end of the school year, bringing together community members, educators, and service providers to celebrate and support military families.

## **Supporting the Grand Opening of Cyclone Bagels**

DVS celebrated the grand opening of Cyclone Bagels in Coney Island, operated by Concern for Independent Living. This unique business offers vocational training and employment

placement for veterans, while repurposing unused bagels to benefit local veteran programs. The grand opening marks a milestone in supporting veteran-centered economic initiatives.

### **Empowering Women Veterans Through Women Forward NYC**

DVS hosted the Women Veterans Pink and White Luncheon, focusing on wellness and empowerment for women veterans. This event provided resources on mental health, entrepreneurship, and professional development, highlighting DVS's commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by women veterans.

### **Supporting Gold Star Families**

In April, DVS joined Borough President Richards for a Gold Star Spouses Day ceremony honoring the surviving spouses of fallen service members. The event featured a flag unveiling at the Helen Marshall Cultural Center and advocacy for legislative support.

### **Promoting Artistic Expression Among Veterans**

DVS partnered with the Salmagundi Club to produce the National Veterans Art Show, "Journeys Onward," showcasing artwork by veterans and their family members. DVS also participated in the Virtual Military Veterans Artist Network Symposium, promoting creative opportunities for veterans.