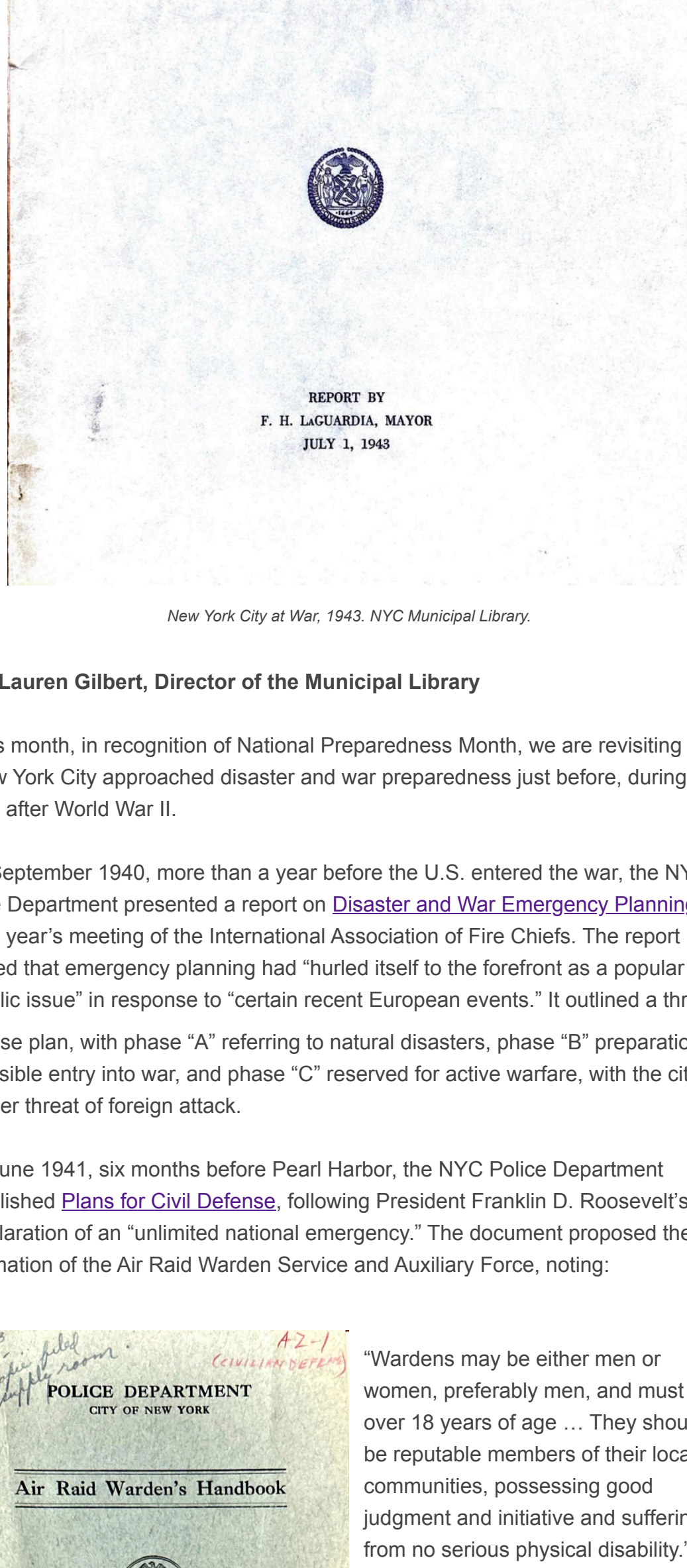


## Municipal Library Notes September 2025

### Target No.1: Civil Defense and Disaster Planning in NYC



New York City at War, 1943. NYC Municipal Library.

By Lauren Gilbert, Director of the Municipal Library

This month, in recognition of National Preparedness Month, we are revisiting how New York City approached disaster and war preparedness just before, during, and after World War II.

In September 1940, more than a year before the U.S. entered the war, the NYC Fire Department presented a report on [Disaster and War Emergency Planning](#) at that year's meeting of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. The report noted that emergency planning had "hurled itself to the forefront as a popular public issue" in response to "certain recent European events." It outlined a three-phase plan, with phase "A" referring to natural disasters, phase "B" preparation for possible entry into war, and phase "C" reserved for active warfare, with the city under threat of foreign attack.

In June 1941, six months before Pearl Harbor, the NYC Police Department published [Plans for Civil Defense](#), following President Franklin D. Roosevelt's declaration of an "unlimited national emergency." The document proposed the formation of the Air Raid Warden Service and Auxiliary Force, noting:



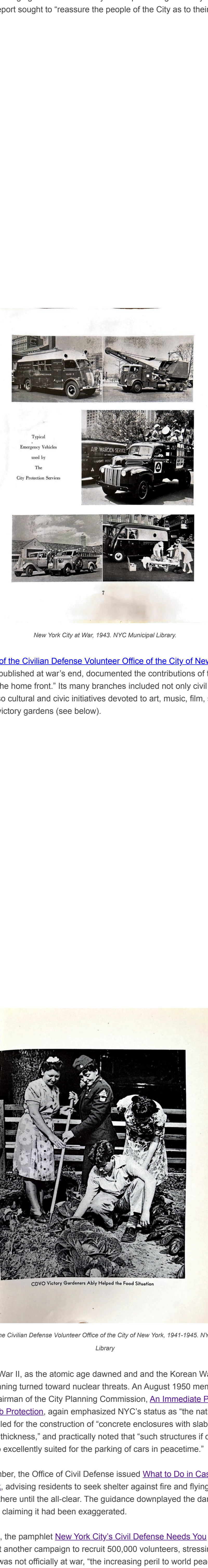
Air Raid Warden's Handbook, 1941. NYC Municipal Library.

"Wardens may be either men or women, preferably men, and must be over 18 years of age ... They should be reputable members of their local communities, possessing good judgment and initiative and suffering from no serious physical disability."

The training program included eight lectures on topics such as First Aid, Incendiary Bombs, and Gas Warfare. Later that year, the Police Department followed up with the pocket-sized [Air Raid Warden's Handbook](#) (left), which laid out the duties of wardens in greater detail.

Beginning in July 1942, NYC commenced a 10-week in-service training course entitled [Warime Protection for Municipal Employees](#), addressing the "growing need for an adequate understanding by the City's employees of the problem of civilian protection in wartime." The coursebook compiles 21 lectures on subjects ranging from detecting enemy aircraft and protecting communications systems to blackout lighting and emergency utilities.

On June 2, 1943, NYC launched a 10-day campaign at City Hall Plaza to recruit [500,000 Civilian Defense Volunteers](#) to supplement the 250,000 already enrolled. The campaign's urgent message was that "everyone must be made to realize that he or she has a service to contribute to support our Armed Forces by action on the Home Front." With the City branded as "Target No. 1," (see below) the effort sought to enlist one out of every ten New Yorkers. Posters, radio spots, retail displays, a mass demonstration at Madison Square Garden, puppet shows, and films all carried the same message.



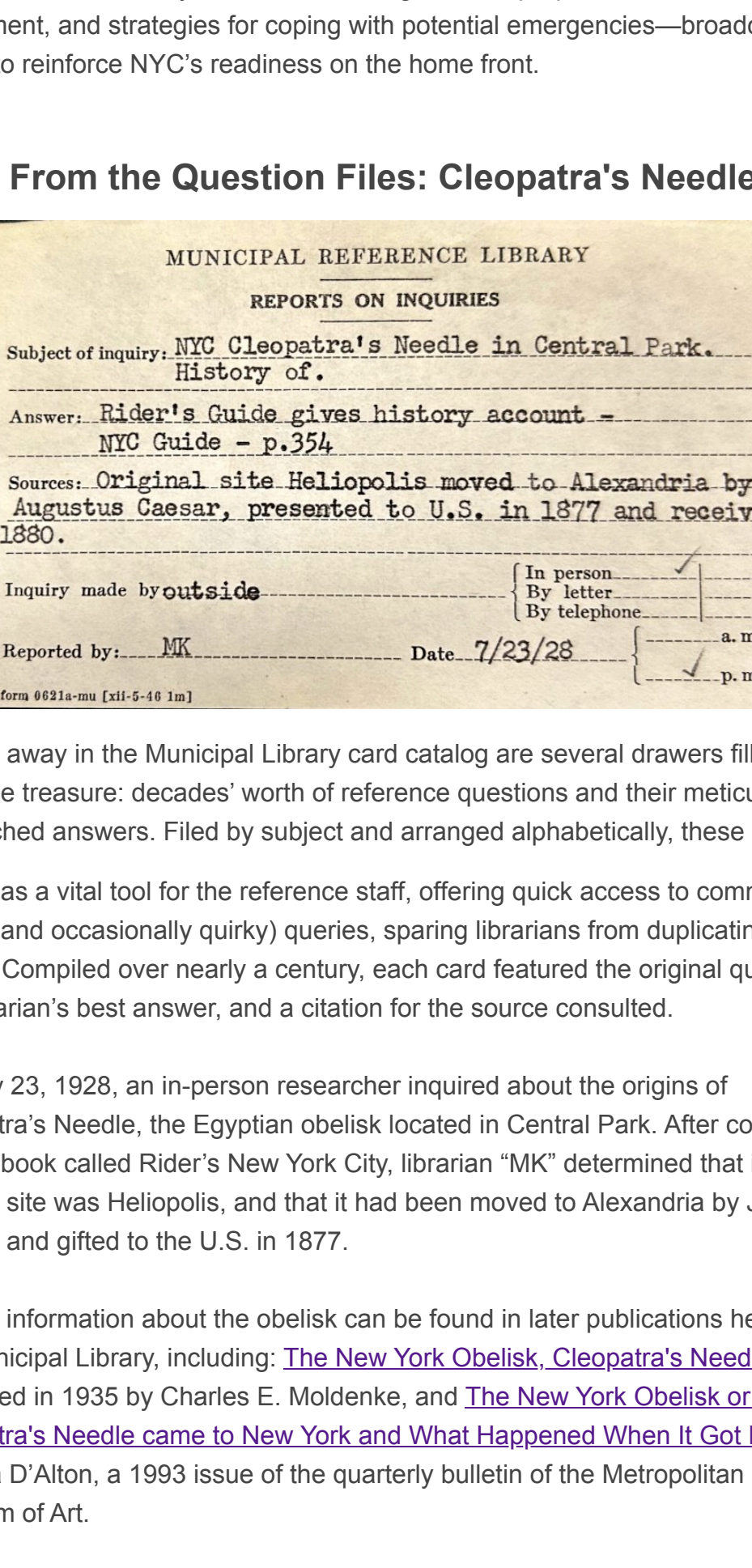
History of the Civilian Defense Volunteer Office of the City of New York, 1941-1945. NYC Municipal Library.

By July 3, 1943, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's report [New York City at War](#) (see first image, above) described a civilian defense force of nearly 432,000 volunteers, about one in every 11 adults. The report, which outlined the various divisions and their functions, included photos of volunteers in training and in action (see below). While acknowledging NYC's vulnerability as the prime target "of any invading force," the report sought to "reassure the people of the City as to their safety."



New York City at War, 1943. NYC Municipal Library.

The [History of the Civilian Defense Volunteer Office of the City of New York, 1941-1945](#), published at war's end, documented the contributions of the City's "soldiers of the home front." Its many branches included not only civil defense units, but also cultural and civic initiatives devoted to art, music, film, salvage, books, and victory gardens (see below).

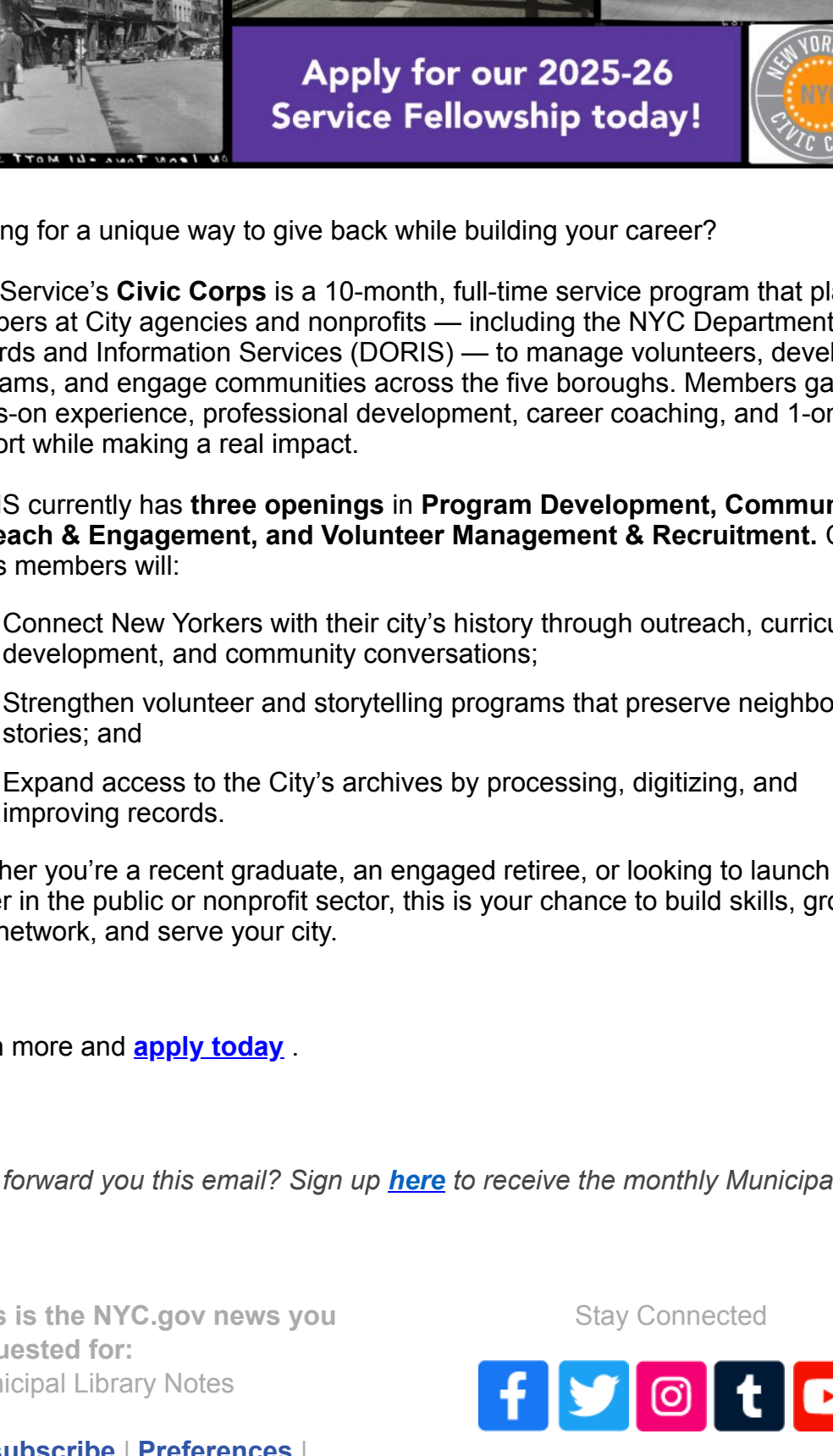


History of the Civilian Defense Volunteer Office of the City of New York, 1941-1945. NYC Municipal Library.

After World War II, as the atomic age dawned and the Korean War started, disaster planning turned toward nuclear threats. An August 1950 memorandum from the Chairman of the City Planning Commission, [An Immediate Program for Atomic Bomb Protection](#), again emphasized NYC's status as "the nation's no.1 target." It called for the construction of "concrete enclosures with slabs and walls of adequate thickness," and practically noted that "such structures if of sufficient size are also excellently suited for the parking of cars in peacetime."

That September, the Office of Civil Defense issued [What to Do in Case of Atomic Bomb Attack](#), advising residents to seek shelter against fire and flying objects, and remain there until the all-clear. The guidance downplayed the danger of radioactivity, claiming it had been exaggerated.

Also in 1950, the pamphlet [New York City's Civil Defense Needs You](#) (see below) launched yet another campaign to recruit 500,000 volunteers, stressing that while the country was not officially at war, "the increasing peril to world peace has made it imperative to take all measures to meet the consequences of an atomic conflict."



New York City's Defense Needs You, 1950. NYC Municipal Library

Finally, from September 1950 to March 1951, a series of WNYC [Radio Broadcasts](#) featured city officials discussing disaster preparedness, volunteer recruitment, and strategies for coping with potential emergencies—broadcasts meant to reinforce NYC's readiness on the home front.

### From the Question Files: Cleopatra's Needle

MUNICIPAL REFERENCE LIBRARY	
REPORTS ON INQUIRIES	
Subject of inquiry: <u>NYC Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park.</u>	
History of: _____	
Answer: <u>Rider's Guide gives history account -</u>	
<u>NYC Guide - p.354</u>	
Source: <u>Original site Heliopolis moved to Alexandria by Augustus Caesar, presented to U.S. in 1877 and received 1880.</u>	
Inquiry made by <u>outside</u>	In person <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Reported by: <u>MK</u>	By letter <input type="checkbox"/>
Date: <u>7/23/28</u>	By telephone <input type="checkbox"/>
	a.m. <input type="checkbox"/>
	p.m. <input type="checkbox"/>

Tucked away in the Municipal Library card catalog are several drawers filled with a unique treasure: decades' worth of reference questions and their meticulously researched answers. Filed by subject and arranged alphabetically, these cards

served as a vital tool for the reference staff, offering quick access to commonly asked (and occasionally quirky) queries, sparing librarians from duplicating efforts. Compiled over nearly a century, each card featured the original question, the librarian's best answer, and a citation for the source consulted.

On July 23, 1928, an in-person researcher inquired about the origins of Cleopatra's Needle, the Egyptian obelisk located in Central Park. After consulting a guidebook called Rider's New York City, librarian "MK" determined that its original site was Heliopolis, and that it had been moved to Alexandria by Julius Caesar and gifted to the U.S. in 1877.

Further information about the obelisk can be found in later publications held at the Municipal Library, including: [The New York Obelisk, Cleopatra's Needle](#), published in 1935 by Charles E. Moldenke, and [The New York Obelisk or How Cleopatra's Needle came to New York and What Happened When It Got Here](#) by Martina D'Alton, a 1993 issue of the quarterly bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

### Serve Your City, Shape Your Future!



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NYC Service's **Civic Corps** is a 10-month, full-time service program that places members at City agencies and nonprofits—including the NYC Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS)—to manage volunteers, develop programs, and engage communities across the five boroughs. Members gain hands-on experience, professional development, career coaching, and 1-on-1 support while making a real impact.

DORIS currently has **three openings** in **Program Development, Community Outreach & Engagement, and Volunteer Management & Recruitment**. Civic Corps members will:

- Connect New Yorkers with their city's history through outreach, curriculum development, and community conversations;
- Strengthen volunteer and storytelling programs that preserve neighborhood stories; and
- Expand access to the City's archives by processing, digitizing, and improving records.

Whether you're a recent graduate, an engaged retiree, or looking to launch your career in the public or nonprofit sector, this is your chance to build skills, grow your network, and serve your city.

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