

NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD 2023 ANNUAL REPORT



Photo Credit: NY Daily New/Getty Images

NEW YORK CITY VETERANS' ACHIEVEMENTS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*“For throughout the annals of history, whenever and wherever the forces of darkness has sought to extinguish the light of liberty, American veterans have been holding the lantern as high as they can for us all.” – **President Joseph R. Biden***

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



Wendy McClinton, Chairperson Charles Hernandez, Vice Chairperson Mercedes Elias, Secretary

March 1, 2024

Honorable Mayor Eric Adams
Deputy Mayor Anne Williams-Isom
NYC Council Speaker Adrienne E. Adams
Councilmember Robert Holden, Chair, Veterans Committee NYC Council

Greetings,

Submitted for your review is the New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) end of the year report for 2023.

This report highlights the concerns of veterans shared during the NYC Veterans Advisory Board Public Hearing Sessions. The public sessions are held every other month and provide our city's veterans a voice to share and give input into issues that plague the veteran community or that can better the services delivered to the veteran community. These sessions are also a great place to find out what works and what does not. This report will also include dates, times and the location of each session. The sessions were conducted using a hybrid platform allowing attendees to attend via zoom or in person. This year, for those who chose to attend in person, we held session at various college campuses, VSO Posts, VA Campus and the like. This allowed for more visibility and understanding of the Veterans Advisory Board coupled with broadening the outreach to all veterans.

Secondly, the report shares the recommendations of the VAB to the elected officials governing our city's veterans and to the Department of Veterans Services (DVS).

Finally, submitted for your review as an addendum is the Department of Veterans Services annual report.

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 Veterans. Please direct all questions or concerns my email at WMcClintonVABNYC@gmail.com or I can be reached at 917-642-1785.

Sincerely,



Wendy McClinton

Chair, NYC Veterans Advisory Board

NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

As of December 31, 2023, 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.

Board Member	Borough	Email (@gmail.com)	Term Expires	Appointment
Wendy McClinton Chairman	Brooklyn	WMcClintonVABNYC	June 4, 2021	Council
Mercedes Elias Secretary	Queens	MEliasVABNYC	February 17, 2024	Mayor
Todd Haskins	Manhattan	THaskinsVABNYC	February 17, 2024	Mayor
Paul Dietrich	Staten Island	PDietrichVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Mayor
John Rowan	Queens	JRowanVABNYC	November 19, 2021	Council
Jennifer Kamrowski	Manhattan	JKamrowskiVABNYC	February 17, 2024	Mayor
Andrew Walcott	Brooklyn	AWalcottVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Mayor
Linda Ollis	Staten Island	LOllisVABNYC	May 9, 2025	Mayor
Patricia LaBorda	Bronx	Patricia.laborda	June 6, 2024	Council
Marisa Estrella	Bronx	worldwideveteransrd	August 22, 2026	Mayor
Ryan Graham	Queens	ryansgrah	August 2, 2026	Council
Brendan Gibbons	Queens	BrendanGibbonsNYCVAB	August 1, 2026	Council
Diego Rubio	Manhattan	Diegorrubio	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Josh Sooklal	Manhattan	JSooklalVABNYC	February 16, 2027	Mayor

New Board Members

In 2023, we welcomed four new board members appointed by the Mayor and the City Council. 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.

Charles Hernandez Vice Chairman	Bronx	CHernandezVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Council
Joe Bello	Bronx	JBelloVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Council
Peter Kauffmann	Queens	PKauffmannVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Mayor

LOCAL VETERAN POLICIES AND RESOURCES

In 2023, we continued to work with DVS to make sure veterans and their families were being supported as they continued to face issues regarding homelessness, food insecurity, priority for city contracts and unemployment.

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 4th 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 2023 AND PLANS FOR 2024

Below is a summary of the key activities for 2023:

Increased Participation with City Council Chair on the Committee on Veterans:

Committee Chair Robert Holden and his staff were active participants at all public sessions held by the VAB. As such, we have listed below a list of bills which have been introduced in response to many of the issues addressed during the public sessions.

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 were 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.

2024 Meeting Schedule: We have scheduled the 2024 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
Wed Feb 21	Manhattan
Wed April 17	Queens
Wed June 12	Staten Island
Thu Sept 12	Bronx
Wed October 30	Brooklyn

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.

Ongoing Objectives: A key objective again for 2024 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 the 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.

PROGRESS TOWARDS PREVIOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

As previously stated, Councilmember Robert Holden, ~~the~~ chair of the Council's Committee on Veterans, along with his staff, attended and participated in every meeting held in 2023. The Councilmember listened to the issues presented before the board and has made efforts to address them by introducing several Intros. (Bills) and Resolutions at the Council. The board would like to recognize the progress made over the past year towards prior recommendations.

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. In our 2022 report, the VAB made a recommendation for a veteran designation preference when applying for contracts through the city.

- **Actions taken:** Council member Robert F. Holden, Chair of the Veterans Committee filed Intro. 0476-2022 on June 6, 2022. This bill would require the Department of Small Business Services, with the City's Chief Procurement Officer, to enable veteran owned business enterprises to identify as such when registering to do business with the city. This bill would also require SBS, with the Department of Veterans' Services, to create a Veteran Leadership Advisory Program to educate veteran owned business enterprises about City procurement opportunities and support such business enterprises during the procurement process. In 2022, DVS launched a Veteran Business Leadership Association (VBLA) to provide one-on-one assistance to veteran business owners in pursuit of city and state certifications, contracting opportunities, networking, and business development.
(<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5669020&GUID=28098E90-12B5-40F6-8A62-0A447747F889&Options=ID|Text|&Search=Int+0476-2022>)

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 introduced and filed Intro. 1213-2023, a bill 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=6372568&GUID=FB4DD8B0-2F64-4E14-BDA3-120C95F8AD55&Options=&Search=>)

- Additionally, the Councilman introduced and filed Intro. 1214-2023 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=6372559&GUID=669A12A2-D616-451E-BE66-9CF97B889763&Options=&Search=>)

Assess, Evaluate and Document the Impact of Our Programs:

Tracking veteran intake requests: During many of the public sessions, veterans commented that outreach to DVS had been done without contact or follow up. The board requests that all processes concerning care for veterans who contact DVS be documented for tracking purposes. This will allow both DVS and the board to recognize the work that is being performed to ensure the veteran's needs are being appropriately addressed.

- ***Actions taken:*** Pursuant to Local Law 44 of 2019, DVS reports annually on all intake services provided by the department, the functional titles of its staff and summary of their responsibilities. FY23's Annual Report can be found here: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/veterans/downloads/pdf/Local%20Law%2044%20-%20DVS%20Annual%20Report%202023%20FINAL%202023-11-06.pdf>

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:*** Councilmember Joseph Borelli introduced Intro. 0377-2022, 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=5656485&GUID=42CDA08B-13DA-410D-80DF-C399502C7BB3&Options=ID|Text|&Search=veterans>)

DVS PROGRESS TOWARDS PRIOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The VAB would like to recognize the progress DVS has made over the past year based on previous recommendations.

Develop a Comprehensive Veterans Outreach Plan: Over the past year, DVS has continued to expand its communication and outreach capabilities. They have provided information to veterans, their families, and active service members through community outreach, social media (X, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn), and a weekly newsletter. Communication and outreach remain critical to ensure veterans and their families are made aware of DVS programs.

Dedicated Personnel within DVS Assigned as Claims Representatives: Navigating the Federal VA bureaucracy to access benefits for which a veteran qualifies is difficult. This has become more challenging as many of the traditional providers of these services have either lost funding or support staff trained to complete these activities. DVS has certified staff (under the State DVS umbrella) to serve as representatives to submit claims on behalf of veterans and their families. 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 into the New York City economy. Based on an analysis by DVS, the national average of veterans with a VA rating is 27.8%. Currently, NYC has 16.5% of its veterans with a VA rating. It would take 23,821 veterans to file for a disability rating to get us to the national average. The below 2023 VA Disability Rates table shows how much money would be available to veterans within New York City should they be approved for a VA rating. Note that these numbers are only for veterans alone and would increase if the veteran has dependents.

Disability Rating	Monthly Payment (\$)	NYC Claims @ 27.8%
10%	165.92	\$ 3,952,380.32
20%	301.74	\$ 7,187,748.54
30%	508.05	\$ 12,102,259.05
40%	731.86	\$ 17,433,637.06
50%	1,041.82	\$ 24,817,194.22
60%	1,319.65	\$ 31,435,382.65
70%	1,663.06	\$ 39,615,752.26
80%	1,933.15	\$ 46,049,566.15
90%	2,172.39	\$ 51,748,502.19
100%	3,621.95	\$ 86,278,470.95

Develop a Plan to Celebrate Veterans Throughout History: A critical part of the agency's mission is celebrating veterans and what they have contributed to our nation and New York City. DVS continued to promote recognition for New York City veterans to bridge generational gaps, preserve our city's rich military history and foster a citywide appreciation for service. DVS continues to work with local organizations to celebrate veterans across all eras. This effort was de-prioritized during the pandemic but has since returned, most notably with New York City's 2023 Fleet Week.

Add Resources for 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. Currently, the Deputy Commissioner is serving as the General Counsel & Agency Chief Contracting Officer. 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. Feedback from those whose contracts will be reviewed in 2024.

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.

Increase Interagency Cooperation Regarding Vendors' Preferences for Veterans

Street vending is New York City's oldest entrepreneurial venture for veterans going back to 1894 when New York State legislators enacted the 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 recommend a formal seat for a veteran ~~to sit~~ 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.

Provide Funding and Resources for Student Veterans: Following the departure of many city residents because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges in NYC reported a decrease in ~~the~~ overall population on their campuses. This included student-veterans, specifically CUNY schools, which reported a 20% drop in attendance, where a contributing factor included housing and the increased cost of living in New York City. We believe New York City needs to provide greater funding and resources to attract and actively recruit veterans to attend schools here, which would also create employment opportunities locally, post-graduation. 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). We recommend DVS work with student veteran representatives to assess what it can do to better support our student veterans.

Assess, Evaluate and Document the Impact of Our Programs:

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.

As such, we call upon the administration and the City Council to provide proper funding specifically dedicated to evaluating and documenting programs, including:

- 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.

- ✓ Tracking veteran intake requests: During many of the public sessions, veterans commented that outreach to DVS had been done without contact or follow up. The board requests that all processes concerning care for veterans who contact DVS be documented for tracking purposes. This will allow both DVS and the board to recognize the work that is being performed to ensure the veteran's needs are being appropriately addressed. While progress has been made to track intake requests, we recommend additional tracking for follow-up actions to ensure veterans' needs are being appropriately addressed. This includes inquiries for benefits, crisis support, health care, legal assistance, military discharge or separation documents and claims processing.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DVS

Codify the responsibilities of DVS and VAB. As the department and the advisory board have increased their responsibilities and impact, there is a greater need to codify the responsibilities of both entities, to ensure all parties are cognizant of expectations going forward. We recommend this as an internal policy/regulation item between DVS and the VAB to ensure that both parties can continue to work together to focus on the needs of the veterans in New York City.

Invest in Resources to Encourage and Support Veteran Engagement in the Political Process: While engagement has been successful at the national level, New York City has not fared as well with currently no sitting City Council member having served in the military (as an example). Consistent with our guiding principle of supporting veterans' continued service as citizens, DVS should support programs that assist veteran engagement in the political process. We commend DVS and recommend they continue to encourage veterans and their family members to serve on their local community boards. We also recommend that all community boards have at least one veteran member.

Providing Personnel Support for the VAB: This has been a continued unresolved issue, and the current resolution to have a VA work study intern provide administrative assistance has been challenging. 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.

Increased Communication for City Council Hearings Impacting Veterans. There has been insufficient communication regarding City Council hearings on issues impacting veterans. Veterans want to have a voice, and they will show up to relevant and important hearings. Now that hearings are available to attend virtually, we believe there will be increased engagement. We recommend DVS assists in disseminating information to veterans and their families regarding Council Veteran Committee hearings through their current communications platforms.

LEGISLATION AND PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Follow On Actions Towards Progress Made: Within this report we previously listed actions taken towards previous recommendations. We implore members of the City Council to pass these bills to ensure we continue to support veterans in New York City.

Employment and Entrepreneurship: Stable employment is a critical element of supporting veterans' continued service as citizens. Whether something as simple as paying taxes or more significant such as volunteering activities or engaging in the political process, stable employment is required. In 2022, DVS established the Veterans Business Leadership Association which assists veteran business owners.

In ensuring our veterans remain employed and in well-paid jobs, we recommend the following:

- **City Employment:** The government is the largest employer in the city, and it should lead by example. Additionally, there are many City and State agencies that face potentially acute labor shortages, such as the MTA, where a large proportion of its skilled labor are eligible for retirement over the next five years. Transitioning service members could be a cost-effective pipeline for talent. While the city does waive fees on civil service exams for veterans, it should also develop a citywide veteran employment program. These include classifying veterans as a protected class where appropriate so that they can be provided with a hiring preference, supporting agencies' creation of a veteran employee support network, and recruiting initiatives for attracting transitioning veterans to various city employment opportunities. The city should also seek collaborative commercial and non-profit leaders to develop programs such as those run by Helmets to Hardhats which train transitioning veterans for careers in specific (union) trades.
- **Private Employment:** Critical to supporting veterans' continued service as citizens are supporting their stable employment. While New York City does not control private employers; it can act as a facilitator for private companies who want to hire veterans. These programs can potentially be revenue-neutral through Federal government employment programs for veterans, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credits (WOTC) program, which can provide businesses up to \$9,600 in tax credits per eligible veteran hired if those tax credits are then redeployed in the city.
 - **Track Outcomes:** Establish policies to track outcomes for long-term unemployed veterans who have obtained employment, WOTC credits for employers, and other key performance indicators.

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship is the lifeblood of America. According to the Small Business Administration from 2012 Census Bureau Data, veterans own 9% of small businesses, while only comprising 6.7% of the population. Nationally, veteran-owned firms generated \$1.14 trillion in receipts annually and employed 5.03 million people. State and Federal governments provide a great deal of support to small businesses in the forms of training, contract support, financing, and other benefits. As such, New York City should support veterans who seek to become entrepreneurs through a comprehensive program. The program should include, among other attributes, the following three specific items:

- Establish a Veteran Preference in Contracting with New York City: Currently there has been progress made towards identifying as a veteran-owned business, but no preference has been established in the contracting portals for veterans.
- Connect Veteran Entrepreneurs to Resources: In order to support and encourage entrepreneurship, programs should be created to connect veteran entrepreneurs to resources. Specialized resources are active in New York, including: The Coalition for Veteran Owned Business (CVOB) through the Institute for Veteran and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University, Veterans Future Lab at NYU, Bunker Labs, and more.

Veteran Treatment Courts: Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) have now been 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 \$60,076, the most expensive state in the country, nearly twice the national average of \$31,286. 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. Veteran's Treatment Courts in NYC 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 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.

Continue to Find Innovative Funding Strategies: While many of the resources and funding for the services that DVS provides will be provided from the budget and other government sources, there are times that the most innovative public policy will require other sources. New York City, as the financial capital of the world, should be at the forefront of innovation in funding and establishing public/private partnerships. DVS received funding from New York State for the Joseph P. Dwyer veterans peer to peer program and have chosen to allocate funding to various non-profits operating within New York City. By identifying key performance indicators and gauging the outcomes of initiatives like the Joseph P. Dwyer program, DVS will be able to continue to explore funding strategies to help offset the needs of our veterans that are not currently being met in the city's budget.



James W. Hendon
COMMISSIONER

Glenda V. Villareal
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

December 31, 2023

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 2023, I am filled with immense pride in our accomplishments and the continuous strides we are making in support of our veterans and their families.

This past year has been particularly significant. On November 29, 2023, we celebrated the invaluable contributions of veterans within NYC Government Labor communities through the Veterans Labor Union Breakfast. This event, hosted in partnership with the NYC Mayor's Office of Labor Relations, was not only a celebration but also an essential platform for dialogue and development, providing our veterans with resources and opportunities for career advancement within the labor sector.

In another pioneering effort, the Veteran Street Vendor Appreciation Reception marked a remarkable collaboration among various city departments and the DVS. This first-of-its-kind event underscored our commitment to supporting veteran entrepreneurs, particularly those who enhance the vibrancy of our city through street vending.

2023 also marked the 50th anniversary of the end of combat operations in Vietnam. We honored this significant milestone by hosting The Wall That Heals at Flushing Meadows Corona Park. This tribute was a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by over three million Americans who served during the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, we continued to pilot the Military Family Advocate Program in partnership with NYC Public Schools. This initiative, now in its first year and involving 77 schools on Staten Island, aims to ensure that every school has a designated staff member who understands and can effectively address the needs of military and veteran families.

Looking ahead to 2024, DVS is committed to further enhancing our services, particularly through the introduction of legislative measures such as Intro 1237. This legislation will improve our data-sharing capabilities, helping us better identify and reach untethered veterans. Our focus will remain on integrating these veterans into the broader ecosystem of DVS services, providing care coordination before they transition from active duty, and connecting them to local veteran service organizations.

We will also intensify our efforts in areas crucial for veteran well-being, such as housing support and VA claims assistance, ensuring that veterans receive the benefits they rightfully deserve.

Together, with continued support and collaboration across agencies and organizations, we are dedicated to transforming the lives of New York City veterans, making every service and opportunity accessible to them.

Thank you for your continued support and trust in our mission. To aid you with your 2023 annual report, I am writing to share highlights from our agency's accomplishments over the last year.
Respectfully,

James Hendon
Commissioner

Overview of DVS Accomplishments: 2023

January

15th Annual SVA NatCon: From January 5th – 7th, DVS attended the Student Veterans of America (SVA) National Conference in Orlando, Florida. Agency leadership spoke on a panel that made the case for transitioning Veterans to choose NYC as their next destination to live, learn, and work. The presentation highlighted the City University of New York (CUNY), DVS, and NYC’s various social services and community programs. The conference was attended by roughly 3,000 student Veterans from across the country.

NationSwell: The Future of the Workforce: DVS participated in the New York series of a salon that sought to unpack some of the biggest questions about how to build the workforce of the future. The salon aimed to draw on examples from inspiring leaders who are innovating across the nation to create a composite image of the best solutions, recommendations, tools, and opportunities available, to share with our wider community.

February

NASDVA Midwinter Conference: From February 19th -22nd, DVS attended the National Association of Directors of Veterans’ Affairs (NASDVA) Midwinter Conference, which brought together the Veterans’ Services State Directors, Commissioners and Secretaries from all 50 States, U.S. Territories and the District of Columbia. The Conference encouraged communication, facilitated discussion, and promoted best practices to successfully advocate for our Nation’s more than 18.5 million Veterans, their families and survivors.

March

UWVC 2023 NYC Veterans Day Parade Grand Marshal Announcement: On March 20th, DVS joined The United War Veterans Council (UWVC) to mark the 20th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War by naming the CEO of Wounded Warrior Project, retired US Army Lieutenant General Mike Linnington as Grand Marshal of the 2023 New York City Veterans Day Parade. The ceremony took place before an audience of Veterans representing all eras and branches of service on the flight deck of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum.

Vietnam Veterans Day (50th Anniversary of end of U.S. Combat Operations): On March 25th, DVS partnered with the United War Veterans Council to host Vietnam Veterans Day ceremonies. Despite several of the activities being canceled due to weather, the Mayor delivered remarks, and a name reading as well as resource fair were held at the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen. Over 200 Veterans and members of the community participated in Vietnam Veteran Day 2023. DVS also teased the arrival of The Wall That Heals later in the year.

Staten Island Vietnam Veterans “Welcome Home” Breakfast: On March 29th, DVS attended a “Welcome Home” Breakfast for Staten Island Vietnam Veterans. Joined by Staten Island District Attorney Michael E. McMahon, Borough President Vito J. Fossella, members of Vietnam Veterans

of America (VVA) Chapter 421, and others. The breakfast served as a “Welcome Home” to Staten Island’s Vietnam War Veterans. Also, it highlighted residents who have committed to their care and well-being of Richmond County’s Vietnam Veteran Community.

April

Street Co-Naming Ceremony Honoring Sgt. Mario Nelson: On April 8th, DVS joined Councilwoman Mercedes Narcisse, NYS Department of Veterans’ Services Commissioner Vivianne DeCohen, NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) Commissioner Manuel Castro, and others to rename a street after Army Sergeant Mario Nelson, who was killed in Iraq in 2006.

Expert Series: Spring 2023 Employing U.S. Vets Conference: On April 13th, DVS participated in a panel discussion centered on leveraging the leadership and resilience of Veterans. The session focused on how Veteran employees are faring in the current climate, it analyzed their leadership skills and qualities, and examined how the resilience learned during the Veterans’ military years can help to elevate their civilian employers.

Fireside Chat With NYS And NYC Commissioners On Veterans’ Services Legal And Legislative Matters:

DVS’ Commissioner participated in a fireside chat alongside his New York State counterpart to identify what they see as the legal and legislative challenges facing Veterans, their goals regarding how to address those challenges, and how attorneys in New York State and the New York State Bar Association itself can assist.

May

Commissioning of the USS Cooperstown: On May 8th, the U.S. Navy commissioned its newest Freedom-variant littoral combat ship, the USS Cooperstown (LCS 23), in New York City, New York. DVS attended the commissioning ceremony along with the Secretary of the Navy, New York Governor Hochul, Baseball Hall of Fame Inductee Joe Torre and others. The USS Cooperstown is the first naval ship named after Cooperstown, New York, home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. The Cooperstown honors the 70 Hall of Famers who served the United States during wartime in a range of conflicts spanning the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War.

Fleet Week New York: On May 25th, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard leaders celebrated the launch of Fleet Week with a kickoff breakfast hosted by Mayor Eric Adams and attended by Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro at Gracie Mansion. More than 3,000 Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guardsman visited New York City over the course of seven days. Thousands of New Yorkers visited the USS Wasp (LHD 1) as it remained docked on the west side of Manhattan through Memorial Day weekend. The week’s ceremonies included a wreath laying at the USS Intrepid which was attended by Mayor Adams, and Commissioner Hendon.

In honor of Memorial Day, DVS also played a key role in distributing thousands of US-made American flags to Veteran Service Organizations across the five boroughs for placement on

Veteran graves. In addition to attending local parades, Commissioner Hendon joined local Boy and Cub Scout troops to place flags on hundreds of Veteran graves at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx and at Ocean View Cemetery in Staten Island, while our Press Secretary joined a similar event held at Cypress Hills National Cemetery in Brooklyn.

June

Street Re-naming PFC Luis Moreno: In June, DVS joined The Dominican Veterans of America for a street -re-naming honoring Army Private First-Class Luis Moreno of the Bronx. The event was held at the southwest corner of Fordham Road and Grand Concourse. PFC Moreno was the youngest Soldier to die in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan from the state of New York.

248th Army Birthday Observance: DVS participated in several events related to the celebration of the Army's 248th Birthday, to include the naming of the Honorary Marshal for the 2023 New York City Veterans Day Parade at the Tweed Courthouse and a gala at the New York Athletic Club.

Supporting Transitioning Service Members: The collaboration between the New York Mets and DVS reached new heights with the first-ever Military Transition Summit held at Citi Field. Themed "Tools & Resources for Hacking Your Transition," the summit provided essential support and information to recently separated Service Members and Veterans in New York City. By connecting participants with valuable resources, the summit played a pivotal role in ensuring a smooth and successful transition journey.

Supportive Housing Network of New York (SHNNY) Annual Conference: DVS attended SHNNY's annual conference to remain current as to what is going on in the world of supportive housing and to improve the agency's ability to navigate shifting policies, market pressures, and changing tenant needs, and deepen partnerships along with networks of support. Commissioner Hendon participated in a panel with other City leaders during the Conference. SHNNY's annual convening is the largest supportive housing conference in the nation.

July

NYS Summit on Peer Mentor Programs for Military Veterans: As part of a two-day summit focused on strengthening, advancing, and expanding peer mentor programs for US Military Veterans, DVS participated in a panel discussion titled: *Unique Approaches to Providing Peer Services to Veterans* that examined the peer services marketed to Veterans, the importance of investing in these programs, thoughts on improving said services, and more.

Designation of New York City as an Official Coast Guard City: On July 31st, DVS joined the U.S. Coast Guard for their redesignation as a Coast Guard City. In attendance along with Commissioner Hendon were Vice Adm. Paul Thomas, the Coast Guard Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, Rear Adm. John Mauger, the First Coast Guard District Commander, Capt. Zeita Merchant, the Coast Guard Sector New York Commander and Captain of the Port of New York and New Jersey, and Emergency Management Commissioner Zach Iscol. New York City was

initially designated as the 25th Coast Guard City during a designation ceremony Feb. 4, 2018. The Coast Guard City program was established by Congress in 1998 to recognize the support local governments and communities provide to Coast Guard members and their families. There are currently 29 Coast Guard Cities nationwide.

August

National Night Out: On August 1st, Commissioner Hendon joined the NYPD's 47th Precinct for National Night Out—an annual community-building campaign that promotes police-community partnerships and neighborhood camaraderie to make our neighborhoods safer, more caring places to live. National Night Out enhances the relationship between neighbors and law enforcement while bringing back a true sense of community. Millions of neighbors take part in National Night Out across thousands of communities across the entire United States.

Heroes on the Hudson: On August 4th, Commissioner Hendon joined Heroes on the Hudson, an adaptive maritime sports clinic for New York and New Jersey Veterans. The one-day sailing and kayaking clinic is hosted in partnership with Hudson River Community Sailing and the Inwood Canoe Club. The event created an opportunity for Veterans to bond in an atmosphere that promotes both physical and mental wellness.

September

Honoring Vietnam Veterans: In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the end of combat operations in Vietnam, DVS successfully brought The Wall That Heals, a traveling replica of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., to Flushing Meadows Corona Park last fall. This initiative provided New York City with a poignant opportunity to express gratitude and remembrance for the more than three million Americans who served in the U.S. Armed forces during the Vietnam War.

October

Funeral of WWII Pvt. Wing Hom: In October, the remains of a WWII Soldier were finally found, identified, and repatriated after the Soldier was declared missing in February of 1945. Commissioner Hendon attended his funeral service at the Evergreens Cemetery.

Cyclone Bagels Groundbreaking Ceremony: DVS took part in a groundbreaking ceremony for "Surf Bagels" in Coney Island. The shop will be operated by the organization Concern for Independent Living and offer vocational training and employment placement for Veterans at the site. Unused bagels will also be distributed to the program for daily consumption. The business is anticipated to open in early 2024.

Hope For The Warriors "No Obstacles": Commissioner Hendon joined Hope For The Warriors for a mini-Spartan course at Governors Island, NY. Hope For The Warriors is a National nonprofit founded by military families that provides resources and services promoting well-being, financial stability, and community connection for post-9/11 Service

Members, Veterans and military families nationwide.

November

Veteran Street Vendor Appreciation Reception: In a remarkable collaboration, DVS, the New York Police Department, Department of Sanitation, Parks Department, Department of Small Business Services, Department of Consumer and Worker Protections, the Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings, the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities came together to honor and connect with street vendors in NYC who are also esteemed Veterans of the US Military. This unique reception, the first of its kind, was held in a central, accessible location in the city at 1 Centre Street, offering an inviting atmosphere for Veteran vendors. The gathering aimed to celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit and service of these Veteran vendors, acknowledging their dual roles as military servicemen and women and as vital contributors to the city's vibrant street vending culture. Representatives from each participating entity provided valuable resources and information tailored to the needs of Veteran vendors, including small business support, legal guidance, and accessibility services. The collaboration highlighted the city's commitment to supporting its veteran population, particularly those who have chosen the path of entrepreneurship, ensuring they have the resources and recognition they deserve.

Veterans Month: This year the Mayor's Veterans' Day Breakfast and New York City's Veterans' Day Parade were held separately, with the breakfast hosted at Gracie Mansion on November 9th and the parade kicking off on November 11th as coverage was preempted by college football. At the breakfast, we announced the winners of the NYC Boss Up Veteran Entrepreneurship Program and took the time to honor 101-year-old Buffalo Soldier and NYC Department of Corrections retiree, Roy Caldwell. In addition, DVS participated in countless veteran-related panel discussions, resources fairs, parades and other events that sought to honor our NYC Veteran community throughout the month.

Empowering Veteran Entrepreneurs: In collaboration with the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and the Ron and Kerry Moelis Family Foundation, DVS proudly announced the successful recipients of the inaugural NYC Boss Up Veteran Entrepreneurship Program grants. Honored at Mayor Adams' Veterans Day Breakfast, visionary small business owners were awarded a \$20,000 grant and SBS mentorship, highlighting our commitment to fostering the success of veteran entrepreneurs and contributing to the city's economic resurgence.

"Veterans Feeding Veterans" Initiative: This Thanksgiving, Hello Fresh, in collaboration with the NYC Department of Veterans' Services, generously donated 1,300 turkeys, 1,000 meal kits, and 1,000 chicken meal kits to more than one dozen organizations. With support from Amazon affiliates Cazar Logistics and Twin Woods Transportation, these meal kits were delivered to Veterans and Military Families in need, marking another successful chapter in the ongoing "Veterans Feeding Veterans" effort initiated by Hello Fresh and New York State in June 2020. The program has been a vital lifeline, particularly during the challenging times of COVID-19, addressing food insecurity for Veterans in New York City, the North Country, and Western New York.

Veterans Labor Union Breakfast: On November 29th, 2023, a significant event took place in New York City, celebrating the contributions of Veterans within NYC Government Labor communities. This event, hosted in partnership with the NYC Mayor's Office of Labor Relations, was a vibrant and meaningful acknowledgment of the service and dedication of Veterans who have seamlessly transitioned into various roles within the city's labor unions. The gathering, held at a prominent city venue, brought together Veterans, union representatives, city officials, and community members. It featured speeches from key figures in the government and labor unions, highlighting the invaluable skills and experiences Veterans bring to the workforce. Workshops and networking sessions were also part of the event, providing Veterans with resources and opportunities for career advancement within the labor sector. Additionally, the event served as a platform for discussing ongoing support and recognizing the unique challenges faced by Veterans in the workforce. The celebration was not only a testament to the city's commitment to its Veteran employees, but also a step forward in strengthening the bond between the government, labor, and the Veteran communities.

December

Sen. Gillibrand Press Conference on Veterans Living with Disabilities: In the first week of December, Commissioner Hendon joined Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson in support of Veterans living with disabilities to commemorate International Day for People with Disabilities. Senator Gillibrand and Bronx Borough President Gibson are held a joint press conference at the Throggs Neck Memorial Post-American Legion to highlight the services available to Veterans.

Veterans' Legislative Breakfast: The Flanders Field Veterans of Foreign War Post 150 in Corona, Queens, NY, hosted a legislative breakfast that brought together community leaders, Veterans, and local legislators. This meaningful event, held in the Post's welcoming hall, provided a platform for open dialogue and collaboration between Veterans and policymakers. The focus of the breakfast was on current issues affecting the Veteran community in Queens and beyond, including healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities. Veterans shared their experiences and insights, offering valuable perspectives on the challenges they face. Local legislators, in turn, discussed upcoming policies and initiatives aimed at improving the lives of Veterans and their families.

VETCON: In December, DVS attended the 2023 Veterans in Economic Transition Conference (VETCON). VETCON is the premier annual conference dedicated to the education and professional growth of New York based, Service-Disabled Veteran Business Owners with a focus on transition, providing financial tools, resources, and support through with a networking with entrepreneurs, state agencies, and industry leaders.

Ongoing Agency Initiatives

Big Apple Transition Assistance (TAP)

This program offers transition assistance for service members and their families in New York City. The program offers many services in areas such as employment, education, finances, and health and wellness.

Care Coordination & VetConnectNYC

VetConnectNYC continues to provide Veterans and their families with referrals to a network of vetted social services providers.

Communications

The DVS Communications team sustain its content-rich weekly newsletter and develops our comprehensive website content for nyc.gov/vets. The team also leverages new advertising tactics to engage Veterans of all ages, including print ads in local newspapers, direct mail, text messaging, and radio commercials.

Crisis Intercept Mapping

Crisis Intercept Mapping groups are comprised of VA medical centers, behavioral health providers, social service organizations, and other New York City agencies. These providers meet regularly to improve suicide prevention and wellness offerings within the community.

Discharge Upgrade Assistance for Legal Services (DUALS)

A three-year, \$1.5 million dollar program to address the need for Discharge Upgrade services in New York City. The program provides funding to legal service providers who have demonstrated a unique expertise in discharge upgrades, while managing the sensitivity of client relations for a powerful, yet vulnerable Veteran population.

Expiration of Term of Service (ETS) Sponsorship Program

DVS continues to partner with the ETS Sponsorship Program to support Service Members through the transition from military to civilian life through mentorship and peer support.

Funeral Honors

DVS ensures eligible indigent unclaimed Veterans are provided dignified burials at a national cemetery. DVS works with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner to coordinate military funeral

rights for over 200 New York City Veterans who pass away. In doing so, we make certain that their legacy of service is properly recognized and honored.

Housing and Support Services

The DVS Housing and Support Services team continued moving Veterans into safe housing as our city continued to recover from the pandemic. Since DVS stood up its Housing and Support Services unit in 2015, the agency has housed over 1,500 homeless Veterans. DVS continues to issue letters of support to the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI) program to advocate for real estate developers to obtain incentives to build affordable supportive housing for Veterans. In addition, DVS continues to bring attention to our housing page on our website, which includes a “housing ladder” that offers information about the Veterans Mitchell-lama preference, VA Home Loan, and the Veteran property tax exemption, among other resources.

Military Family Advocate Program.

DVS partners with NYC Public Schools to pilot an effort – currently in Year One – whereby the desired end state is that all DOE schools will have a designated staff or faculty member who is the point of contact for Military & Veteran family needs. The current pilot involves 77 schools on Staten Island.

Mission: VetCheck

VetCheck is a partnership between New York Cares and DVS that brings in commenters to conduct check-in calls with veterans throughout New York City. This outreach program helps further the connection between veterans and their community. This program provides resources for free meals, housing resources, employment information, and mental health services.

VA Disability Claims

Over 6,500 Veterans living in New York City may possibly be eligible to receive Veteran Administration (VA) benefits due to their time in service. The DVS Claims Unit continued to assist Veterans in the review, preparation, and packaging of claims, including those related to Disability Compensation, Survivors Pension, Indemnity Dependency Compensation (DIC), and Education.

VA Work-Study Program at DVS

DVS supports VA Work-Study positions for student veterans across the city. The program allows for student veterans to work in positions such as legal, communications, and information technology.

Veteran Business Leadership Association

In 2022, DVS launched the Veteran Business Leadership Association (VBLA). The VBLA is an empowerment initiative designed to provide one-on-one assistance to Veteran business owners in pursuit of city and state certifications, contracting opportunities, high-level networking, and business development.

Veterans on Campus

Veterans on Campus is an initiative to assist academic institutions to support their student veteran body.

VetBizMap

We continued to add more businesses to VetBizMap, an interactive map that provides the location of Veteran-owned businesses across NYC. VetBizMap includes key business contact information as well as a list of a Veteran-owned business's city and state certifications. To date, the map features 389 Veteran-owned businesses across the five boroughs.

Veteran Voices Project

The Veteran Voices Project (VVP) captures the stories and experiences of local Veterans across the five boroughs. Approximately 80 stories have been added to the archive since the project's launch in 2020. DVS captures stories from Veterans throughout the year, including the voices of more Post-9/11, Vietnam, and World War II Veterans.