**New York City**

**Veterans Advisory Board**

Minutes for the April 29, 2021 meeting held virtually,

representing the meeting for Bronx

**Members**

**Present:**

Todd Haskins (Manhattan) Wendy McClinton (Brooklyn)

Mercedes Elias (Queens) Andrew Walcott (Brooklyn)

John Rowan (Queens) Paul Dietrich (Staten Island)

Joe Bello (Bronx) Jennifer Kamrowski (Manhattan)

**Absent:**

Charles Hernandez (Bronx)

Peter Kauffmann (Queens)

Note: Awaiting board member to be appointed by Speaker’s Office.

**Minutes**

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* Wendy McClinton (Chair) commenced the meeting at 6:00 pm.

Thanked previous officers Todd Haskins and Joe Bello for their work over the past few years. Advisory board introduced themselves on the call.

**Old business:** Questions posed at last Veteran’s Advisory Board (VAB) meeting.

* What would be your position on opportunities to target Veteran Specific messaging for the adoption of Vaccine compliance given that many are in targeted communities.
  + Response: It is each veteran’s personal choice to take the vaccine. The vaccine is available to everyone within the city. John Rowan recognized that the VA has done a good job about getting the vaccine out to the community and that any VA and their spouse can get the vaccine at the VA. Todd Haskins notes that while although it is everyone’s choice, we have a strong recommendation to help the overall population.
* January 06, has been an issue and media and politician start labeling extremism. It was heartbreaking to read an article that says “1 out of 6” was veterans where were involved in capital riots. It is true there was veteran in the group, and the other way, veterans defended the capital. How to address the extremism labeling in this political environment.
  + We don’t address that and it’s the choice of the individuals and officials that respond to that. It is up to an individual’s personal political views.

There is no other old business to discuss.

**Presentation**:

Chair advises that the next meeting dates are June 17th, September 15th and November 18th. Wendy introduces Commissioner Hendon to share Department of Veteran Services (DVS) updates.

Commissioner Hendon thanks incoming and outgoing officers of the VAB. Will focus on updates regarding food, health, housing, employment and a few other items.

1. Food: *nyc.gov/vetfood*. Tied in with Nutrition Kitchen initiative through the Department of Probation twice per month (2nd and 4th Thursday through July and the 1st and 3rd Thursday starting in August) in the Bronx veterans can receive fresh food.
2. Health: *nyc.gov/vethealth*. Working with public engagement unit to call veterans and help them get enrolled in Obamacare if needed, medicare, and also screening to see if they are eligible for VA healthcare. If they want to have a call back for assistance, they can call 311.
3. Housing: *nyc.gov/vethousing*. Supportive Services Veteran Families program will assist paying bills or rent if family is 50% median rent or lower. Housing ladder is now listed on site, will provide step by step guide on what to do and what options are for housing for veterans.
4. Employment: *nyc.gov/vetjobs*. Employment opportunities, training, etc.

Additional items briefed by Commissioner: 2021 veterans survey, also for families and caregivers to respond *Nyc.gov/vetsurvey*. Recording history of NYC veterans through Veteran Voices Project. Saved in municipal archives and the library of Congress *nyc.gov/vetvoices*.

Wendy turns it over to Todd to go over summary of the end of year report. Todd explains process of VAB involvement with the city government and what information is presented in the end of year report. During the start of pandemic, recommendation was made to DVS to assist with food and housing issues for veterans. DVS worked with for profit and nonprofit organizations to help identify, obtain and distribute 40,000 masks through various veteran service organizations and at least 25,000 meals. DVS also initiated Mission VetCheck to do wellness checks and assist veterans with resources throughout the pandemic. Through this initiative made over 24,000 phone calls and identified 1,000 service requests. Mission Home started in 2013, effort to end veteran homelessness. DVS placed 183 veterans in housing in 2020. As of February 2021, the program has placed 1,000 veterans. Vast majority of these resources were obtained from federal government, offsetting some of the costs from the city. Highlighted four recommendations:

1. DVS is heavily under resourced with one employee servicing 14,000 constituents.
2. Veterans on Campus – roughly 12,000 veterans receiving GI Bill here, with most being non-New Yorkers. Vital employment opportunity and income for the city with each student utilizing GI Bill bringing in approximately $250,000 to the city (payment of tuition, room and board, etc.)
3. Provide assistance to veterans in obtaining benefits.
4. Provide contract preference for veteran owned businesses.

Todd states that the report is provided on DVS website, which can be accessed here: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/veterans/downloads/pdf/vab_2020_end_of_year_report-vfinal_1.pdf>. Any questions regarding the report can be sent to [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov).

Wendy asks for any additional questions from the attendees. Wendy reminded all attendees that we are a city board and have no authority in what the VA (federal agency) does regarding its rules and regulations.

John Rowan discussed his participation in the Senate Veteran Affairs Committee hearing, his previous participation with Vietnam Veterans issues concerning Agent Orange and expanding that to recent (Gulf War to present day) veteran’s issues with toxic exposure. Nine bills were on the agenda dealing with toxic exposures and these will be up next at the House Veterans Affairs Committee agenda. Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) were all present during the hearing. Brought a few issues to the hearing, one being that children of veterans exposed to Agent Orange are the only ones that can file a claim for Spina Bifida, but there are likely other children of veterans who had toxic exposure that have similar health issues.

**Public Comments**: The following comments were submitted to the board during the virtual meeting and were addressed throughout the course of the meeting. Both questions and responses are provided.

**Veejay Bhagwandeen**: Does the food program include food for pets or service animals?

* Response: Commissioner responded that currently the food program is only for humans.
* Response: Attendee Marco Bongioanni provided response: The mayors alliance for NYC Animals has some resources. It is a non-profit http://animalalliancenyc.org/needhelp/food.htm Also here in the Bronx District 13 is doing a free pet food giveaway on several dates in May (may 1st and 22nd). I believe you have to live in the district to access it but interested individuals can contact NYC Councilman Gjonaj at 718-931-1721 or mgjonaj@council.nyc.gov for more info.

**Veejay Bhagwandeen**: Does the employment help also include caregivers that are not spouses?

* Response: Commissioner responded that yes, it includes any veteran community members – caregiver, survivor, family member or service member.

**Darryl Taylor Sr**: If you have information about jobs for vets where can you send it?

* Response: Commissioner and Mercedes responded [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov)

**Nicole Wallace-Edgar**: If I want to use GI Bill for my daughter to go to school, how do I do that? Yes I am a veteran.

* Response: Amauri Espinal from DVS responded: <https://www.va.gov/education/transfer-post-9-11-gi-bill-benefits/>

**Richard Enok**: from the Bronx, wanted information from city council on the city parks department where veterans can use the park house. During pandemic, veterans were kicked out of park houses and they were used for other reasons such as voting centers or housing children for school. Would like to represent the Bronx on the board.

* Response: Joe Bello responded: two members from the Bronx are on the board, with Joe being one and Charles Hernandez being the other. Stated it was the Mayor’s administration that is responsible for the park houses and asked DVS to work with parks department to get clarification on it.
* Response: Richard responded that when he calls 311 they don’t even know what park houses are.

**Veejay Bhagwandeen** : How are veterans benefits or SSA benefits protected if veterans want to try getting a new source of income? Golden handcuffs, I am referring to veterans with Mental Health and physical issues that fluctuate.

* Response: No one on the board is qualified to answer since it is related to Social Security.

**H.P.** **Schroer**: What is board’s position relative to discount that should be offered for veterans attending school in NYC? Discount should be for half price Metrofares for student veterans. Stated that while this was approved three years ago, only 400 of the 12,000 have been approved. What steps have been taken to get this reinstated? Working on state level to get all veterans, regardless if they are students, to get veterans half price fares. Asking board to write to Helen Weinstein, Assemblymember to put the bills up for a vote by June 10th. States that money for Metrofares will come from the state, not the city.

* Response: Joe Bello responded that he has worked with H.P. many times on the city council level and they will continue to push to get it done. Money was previously put into budget however pandemic hit when they attempted to implement it.
* Response: Todd Haskins adds that this proposal aligns with Veterans on Campus which suggests city council should find perks to make it easier for veterans go to school in NYC
* Response: Commissioner Hendon responded and referred to Vincent Garcia, DVS Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. H.P. acknowledges that Vincent has been reviewing it for two years. Vincent updates that they have been in discussion with the state legislator and the biggest issue right now was the money that was allocated for it was not included in the most recent budget. They have been working to see what the best way is to resolve this issue, but it is ultimately up to the state finance committee to determine how and when it will be implemented. The bill must first leave committee in order for DVS to get involved with the advocacy.
* Response: H.P. recommends that Mr. Garcia make direct contact with Assemblymember Weinstein and asked if any direct contact had been made with her. Vincent responded he has not because in his role they do not do that, the city on behalf of him would make contact otherwise it would be considered lobbying. Stated he would bring it up to his state legislature counterparts.

**Nicole Wallace-Edgar**: If a veteran used GI benefits for a school, but the school lost accreditation and/or closed down, how does the veteran get those benefits restored?

* Response: Joe Bello responded: <https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/fgib/restoration.asp>

**Marco Bongioanni:** Wanted to share this with participants...The VA has recently updated the VA Welcome Kit. The quick start guides that are in the back (pages 17-42) were significantly expanded and provide some of the best comprehensive, easy to understand, and step by step resource tools for Veterans that have benefit related questions. <https://www.va.gov/welcome-kit/>

End of public comments.

In response to the park centers, the Commissioner acknowledged that he contacted the parks department during the meeting for a response to the public question. Mercedes took note of the number Richard Enok dialed in from to give to DVS for follow up. Commissioner clarified they were closed to traditional uses due to state of emergency and asked when they would be open back up to general usage.

Wendy stated that the next meeting we would like to highlight not for profits, and encouraged them to reach out to present.

**Meeting adjourned.**

**Next meeting:** 6 pmJune 17, 2021

Submitted by: Mercedes Elias, Secretary