

New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB)

2026 Veteran Advisory Board Public Session – Manhattan Wednesday, February 25, 2026

All sessions begin at 6:00 PM sharp and are conducted in hybrid format.

In-Person Location

Margaret Cochran Corbin VA Campus
423 East 23rd Street
New York, NY 10010

Virtual Access (Zoom)

Meeting ID: 959 242 2343

Passcode: 191295

Dial-in: (646) 931-3860

Meeting ID (Phone): 9592422343#

Passcode (Phone): *191295

Meeting Start: 6:04 PM

Meeting End: 7:51 PM

Note: **The meeting experienced intermittent technical issues.**

Members Present

- Mercedes Elias (Queens), Chair – In Person
- Wendy McClinton (Brooklyn) – In Person
- Joshua Sooklal (Manhattan) – In Person
- Diego Rubio (Manhattan) – Remote
- Dennis Torres (Queens) – Remote
- Ashton Stewart (Queens) – In Person
- Ryan Graham (Queens) – In Person
- Frank LaMarsh (Manhattan) – Remote
- Dondi McKellar (Manhattan) – In Person
- Dr. Mecca Nelson (Staten Island), Gold Star Spouse – In Person

Members Absent

- Andrew D. Walcott (Brooklyn)
- Marisa Estrella (Bronx)
- Linda Ollis (Staten Island), Gold Star Mother

Opening

6:04 PM – The meeting was called to order. Nicole Orlando, Deputy Chief of Staff, opened the meeting and introduced Commissioner Yesenia Mata of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). A meeting request form was created for individuals seeking to meet directly with the Commissioner and was distributed to attendees.

Meeting Request Form Link: <https://forms.office.com/g/34ynn9YYWw>

Chair Remarks – Mercedes Elias

Chair Mercedes Elias noted that the 2025 End-of-Year Report is being finalized and announced the creation of a new DVS Work-Study position to support the Veterans Advisory Board. She reaffirmed continued collaboration between DVS and the VAB.

Commissioner Mata Remarks

Commissioner Mata emphasized a commitment to listening and collaboration. She discussed her transition from enlisted to officer leadership and her intent to apply lessons learned from both effective and ineffective leadership experiences. She highlighted accessibility, transparency, and veteran engagement as priorities and acknowledged daily improvements to VetConnect. She also recognized barriers facing older veterans and those unable to travel into New York City.

VAB Elections (Members Only)

6:13 PM – Elections commenced. Voting was unanimous.

Chair: Ryan Graham

Vice Chair: Dr. Mecca Nelson

Secretary: Ashton Stewart

New members were welcomed to the VAB: Frank LaMarsh (Manhattan), Dondi McKellar (Manhattan), and Dennis Torres (Queens).

6:14 PM – Ryan Graham assumed the role of Chair and presided over the remainder of the meeting.

DSO (Department Service Officer) NY / VA Discussion – Colin Anderson

Colin Anderson (DSO NY, Buffalo Regional Office) provided updates regarding VA policy. He explained that a VA rule tying disability ratings to medication usage had been enacted, opened for public comments with >19,000 received, and later temporarily rescinded due to significant backlash, though it remains on the books. He reported that the VA claims backlog has been declared cleared, but questions were raised as to the efficacy of this. The uncertainty lies in the unknown number of

claims that may have been added to the VA Board of Appeals docket. It is suspected that AI was used in this process of attempting to “clear the claim backlog.” Colin recommended continued monitoring of the Federal Register.gov to track this policy.

Contact: Colin.Anderson@va.gov | 518-903-0074

Survivor / Spousal Benefits Discussion

Raised by Dr. Mecca Nelson. Concerns were expressed regarding surviving spouses not receiving entitled benefits or facing difficulty navigating eligibility requirements.

Dr. Nelson spoke about Gold Star, Silver Star, and White Star families, emphasizing that the language used should be more inclusive of often overlooked and forgotten demographics and that these families should be properly recognized and honored.

Dr. Nelson highlighted these demographics are deeply military community-connected, and that the children of veterans should continue to receive recognition, benefits, and access to documents such as the DD214 and DD1300 beyond the age of 23. Dr. Nelson also stressed the importance of expanding housing discounts and making the education benefits process more accessible and manageable.

Discussion included administrative complexity, documentation delays, lack of awareness, and potential disparities in access. Mr. Anderson acknowledged outreach gaps. Commissioner Mata shared her perspective as a military spouse and emphasized the importance of proactive outreach and clearer communication. Commissioner Mata, along with Dr. Nelson, emphasized how families are treated after veterans have served, highlighting that many families feel unseen and unsupported once the service period ends.

Presentation – “Claims and Benefits” (Noah Bray)

Noah Bray, Executive Director of Veterans Support Services, delivered a presentation titled 'Claims and Benefits.' He provided an overview of the VA claims process, the role and limitations of Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), coordination with Veteran Resource Centers and VA facilities, and documentation requirements. He addressed digital accessibility barriers, including reliance on QR codes, and confirmed that paper intake forms and service navigation assistance remain available. He announced a new VetConnect Manager (VA Work-Study position) and noted ongoing improvements to VetConnect. Mr. Gonzalez asked about the DVS VSO team, there are five was the response.

Contact: nbray@veterans.nyc.gov

VetConnect & Accessibility Barriers

Raised by Board Members and Community Participants. Issues included QR code reliance, digital exclusion of older veterans, transportation barriers into Manhattan, and concern that VetConnect may appear mandatory. Donna, DVS Receptionist (full-

time), is available to assist veterans directly. Paper intake forms are available and VetConnect is not mandatory. Daily system updates are underway. Mercedes raised expressed concern by the VAB at previous meetings regarding veterans with tech issues and unable to utilize VetConnect. Nicole responded that DVS is onboarding a manager to oversee VetConnect and to improve options for veterans with tech issues and better oversee tracking of all data in the system.

Contact: connect@veterans.nyc.gov or call 212-416-5250

Housing & Homelessness

Raised by a member of the public. Concerns included housing instability, HUD-VASH vouchers, and navigation challenges within intake systems. The April 29 session was designated as housing-focused. Robin Smith provided homelessness assistance information, and Brian Berry (Samaritan Daytop Village) offered behavioral health and housing support.

Governance / VAB Reform

Raised by a public question. Concerns included lack of official Board email addresses, need for permanent DVS liaison, outdated bylaws (2017), and borough coordination improvements. Pending Board review.

Public Chat Questions

Concerns raised regarding: Referral-based service model causing stress. Commissioner Mata emphasized transparency, flexibility, and willingness to adapt.

Dr. Cleopatra Brown (CB16 Veterans Committee): Requested collaboration regarding sewer/water financial burden on veterans. Asked about DVS representation at Community Board veteran committee meetings. Commissioner Mata agreed to follow-up meeting.

Questions raised regarding: Salary cap limitations impacting homelessness assistance. Some issues require city/state/federal approval beyond DVS authority.

Organizational Challenges Discussed

Every borough staffed with VSOs.

Major Issue: marketing and awareness.

Collaboration and coordination challenges.

Commissioner Mata encouraged grassroots organizing.

Outreach beginning from community level.

Community & Partner Announcements

Brian Berry – Samaritan Daytop Village
Veterans Outreach Coordinator
Alcohol/substance use, mental health, homelessness support
brian.berry@samaritanvillage.org
929-933-0822

Upcoming Events

- Karaoke Event – Staten Island VFW – April 9, 2026
- Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE) 2026 – March 10, 2026 – 10:00 PM – 4:00 AM
- New York City Council – Committee on Veterans – March 4, 2026 – 1:00 PM – 250 Broadway – 8th Floor – Hearing Room 1 (Jointly with Committee on Women and Gender Equity)
- Intrepid After Hours: All About Enterprise – March 24, 2026 – 4:30 PM – 8:00 PM EST

Closing

Chair Ryan Graham thanked former Chair Mercedes Elias and encouraged continued veteran engagement. VAB thanked all who took part in this meeting, both in person and virtually encouraging them all to continue to take part in these “grassroots” themed opportunities to meet with Veteran Advocate Leadership. Mercedes stressed expectations to be “realistic” in understanding needs and what is possible through these meetings at the local, state and federal level.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:51 PM.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, April 29, 2026 – Queens – Housing (Location TBD)

Board email for agenda/public input (submit one week prior):
nycveteransadvisoryboard@gmail.com

Submitted by:

William Moffat
Department of Veterans’ Services (DVS)

Edited by Ashton Stewart, VAB Secretary