

New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB)

2026 Veteran Advisory Board Public Session – Queens (Housing)

Wednesday, April 29, 2026

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

In-Person Location

- Thomas P. Noonan Jr. Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic
- 50-05 Metropolitan Ave
- Ridgewood, NY 11385

Virtual Access (Microsoft Teams)

- Meeting ID: 210 092 792 793 8
- Passcode: E3MU28j2
- Dial in by phone: +1 646-893-7101,,45136594#
- Event Link: <https://events.gcc.teams.microsoft.com/event/5a8c3f8f-af98-48b1-8103-d15c84c271b8@32f56fc7-5f81-4e22-a95b-15da66513bef>

Meeting Times

- Meeting Start: 6:05 PM
- Meeting End: 7:54 PM

Members Present – please confirm boroughs below (present and absent)

- Ryan Graham (Queens) – In Person
- Dr. Mecca Nelson (Staten Island), Gold Star Spouse – In Person
- Ashton Stewart (Manhattan) – In Person
- Dennis Torres (Queens) – In Person
- Joshua Sooklal (Manhattan) – In Person
- Frank LaMarsh (Staten Island) – Remote

Members Absent

- Mercedes Elias (Queens)
- Andrew D. Walcott (Brooklyn)
- Linda Ollis (Staten Island)
- Marisa Estrella (Bronx)
- Diego Rubio (Manhattan)
- Wendy McClinton (Brooklyn)
- Dondi McKellar (Bronx)

Government / Community Representatives

- Laurie Windsor (Office of Rep. Nicole Malliotakis) – Remote

- Ally Ziraschi (Office of CM Vickie Paladino) – Remote

DVS Staff Present

- Yesenia Mata (DVS) – Commissioner
- Donee’ Smalls (DVS) – Executive Director of Housing and Support Services
- Nicole Orlando – Senior Advisor for IGA / Interim EEO Officer
- John Fowler (DVS) – Manager, Affordable Housing Services
- Bradley Badice (DVS) – Analyst
- Noah Bray (DVS) – Executive Director of Veterans’ Support Services
- Horng Chou (DVS) – Deputy Director of Housing and Support Services
- William Moffat (DVS) – VA Work Study Student

Opening

6:05 PM – The meeting was called to order. Board members and attendees introduced themselves. The meeting transitioned directly into housing-focused discussion led by representatives from the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services (DVS).

Commissioner Mata Remarks

Commissioner Mata opened the DVS portion of the meeting and noted this was the second VAB meeting under the current structure. She emphasized the importance of bringing various DVS staff members to meetings to better understand on-the-ground veteran concerns and community issues directly from veterans and stakeholders.

Commissioner Mata reiterated that many veteran-related eligibility and benefits issues discussed during the meeting are controlled at the federal level and outside DVS authority as a city agency. She emphasized that DVS can still improve how it organizes, communicates, and delivers support services to veterans locally.

The Commissioner also stressed the importance of intentional, productive, and solutions-oriented discussions during VAB meetings. She announced plans to attend an upcoming roundtable with a disabilities committee the following week.

Housing Presentation – Donee’ Smalls

Donee’ Smalls, Executive Director of Housing and Support Services, delivered a presentation regarding DVS housing operations and veteran housing support services.

Donee’ outlined two primary housing divisions within DVS:

- Housing Support Services (HSS)
- Affordable Housing Services (AHS)

Affordable Housing Services (AHS), established in April 2025, assists veterans seeking affordable rental housing and guidance toward homeownership.

The Housing Support Services (HSS) team assists veterans experiencing homelessness or housing instability through:

- Shelter and homeless housing support
- Re-housing assistance
- Aftercare services focused on long-term housing stability

Discussion included DVS coordination with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (NYC DHS) and housing providers to assist veterans with:

- Housing applications
- Voucher eligibility
- Apartment searches and lease signings

The presentation also highlighted:

- Veteran preference within NYC Housing Connect
- Homeownership support resources
- Cold War veteran tax exemption information
- Veteran Resource Centers throughout New York City

Affordable Housing Discussion – John Fowler

John Fowler, Manager of Affordable Housing Services, continued the housing discussion and addressed questions regarding housing eligibility, surviving spouses, and HUD-VASH.

Discussion included concerns regarding surviving spouses losing access to certain benefits after remarriage and broader eligibility limitations impacting spouses and families of veterans.

Dr. Mecca Nelson questioned eligibility standards surrounding surviving spouses and asked, “What if my husband were still alive?” highlighting perceived inconsistencies in how benefits eligibility is determined.

Discussion emphasized that many of these policies are determined federally and cannot be changed directly by DVS. Commissioner Mata reiterated that DVS is limited in its ability to change federal law but can continue advocacy and improve city-level coordination and support.

John Fowler noted that veterans generally must remain alive throughout the entirety of the housing application and approval process, creating additional barriers for surviving spouses.

Discussion also clarified that spouses of veterans participating in HUD-VASH through NYCHA may retain voucher eligibility under certain circumstances.

Board members emphasized the importance of continued advocacy surrounding surviving spouse eligibility and support.

Housing Connect / Community Board Discussion

Dr. Cleopatra Brown stated that during a community board meeting she was informed that no veteran-designated units were set aside in an upcoming housing development in Brownsville. She requested a meeting with HPD regarding the issue.

Ryan Graham stated the matter should be discussed further after the meeting.

Donee' Smalls announced that veteran preference has now been added to the NYC Housing Connect application system and stated the process is currently functioning successfully. DVS assists with verification and supporting documentation review.

Dr. Brown additionally noted that the Department of Finance website should be updated to include information regarding Cold War veteran exemptions.

Policy / Organizational Discussion

Ryan Graham discussed the importance of local law, education, and understanding the distinction between administrative agencies, DVS, and legislators when advocating for policy changes.

Ryan Graham stated, "We have failed as a community to organize," emphasizing the need for stronger veteran coordination and grassroots advocacy efforts.

Justice-Involved Veterans Discussion

Questions were raised regarding incarcerated veterans and veterans involved in the justice system. One attendee discussed writing letters on behalf of veterans for parole officers and advocacy purposes.

Discussion included concerns that some veterans cannot access HUD-VASH unless they have previously entered shelter systems.

It was clarified that HUD-VASH eligibility generally requires a veteran to be homeless, street homeless, or at imminent risk of homelessness.

Concerns were raised regarding contradictions between parole requirements and housing eligibility, as parole often requires stable housing while HUD-VASH requires homelessness or imminent risk, creating barriers for justice-involved veterans transitioning back into the community.

Borden Avenue Facility / GPD Discussion

Strong concerns were expressed regarding conditions at the Borden Avenue facility and the Grant Per Diem (GPD) program.

Timothy Pena discussed concerns regarding the Grant Per Diem (GPD) program, citing issues related to violence, drug activity, and overall living conditions within the facility.

Discussion included concerns that the GPD program operates within a shelter-style environment and that veterans are not doing well under current conditions.

It was stated that the GPD program at Borden Avenue is being closed and that no new veterans have reportedly been accepted into the program for approximately three months.

Discussion noted that the facility receives funding through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the New York City Department of Homeless Services (NYC DHS).

Concerns were also raised regarding oversight and transparency. Phil Wong was reportedly attempting to gain access to the facility and was allegedly informed that an NDA would be required for entry.

Additional concerns were raised regarding recreational facilities being shut down and police activity at the site.

Alternative Housing Models Discussion

Jerry Chan discussed the work of Tunnel to Towers Foundation and highlighted its focus on constructing individual homes for veterans rather than shelter-based housing systems or voucher programs.

Dr. Mecca Nelson stated that she serves as an ambassador for Tunnel to Towers.

Discussion also referenced The Home Depot Foundation Veteran Housing Grants Program, which provides grants to nonprofit organizations for the construction or rehabilitation of permanent supportive housing for veterans. Grant awards reportedly range from approximately \$100,000 to \$500,000.

Meeting Tensions / Responses

Ally Ziraschi from the Office of Council Member Vickie Paladino referenced a surprise visit to the Borden Avenue facility and stated that someone with appropriate authority or oversight power may need to conduct an unannounced visit to observe conditions directly.

Ashton Stewart acknowledged frustrations raised during the discussion. He thanked all of the in-person and virtual attendees who took time to join the VAB meeting and stressed that this is a good sign that veterans are showing up and sharing their concerns and emphasized the importance of maintaining productive dialogue. He also said some of the questions raised will be followed up on in these minutes.

- Veteran housing -
 - What happens to application for surviving spouse if veteran passes away?
 - Applications must be filed before veteran passes away
 - If application is approved prior to passing of the veteran, the approved application will be honored for the surviving spouse provided they are listed as spouse in the application/voucher (what term is best suited?) info from John Fowler.
- Additional resources:
 - VA Caregiver Support Program: <https://www.caregiver.va.gov/>
 - Veteran as caregiver:
 - Hamilton Madison House: <https://hamiltonmadisonhouse.org/>
 - DAV Caregiver Support Program: <https://www.dav.org/get-help-now/dav-caregivers-support/>
 - Family Caregiver Alliance: <http://caregiver.org/>
 - Caregiver Action: <https://www.caregiveraction.org/>
- Site visit to Borden Avenue by Commissioner Mata and members of the VAB.
 - Several concerns at Borden Avenue raised at this meeting will be pursued by the VAB including use of the kitchen, 40-50 empty cubicles on site, and the basketball court that is reportedly for residents but currently closed.

Tim expressed frustration regarding a canceled meeting with Commissioner Mata and stated that vacant hotels previously used for migrants could potentially be repurposed for veteran housing.

Donee' Smalls apologized for the level of commotion during portions of the meeting and emphasized that DVS continues to go above and beyond in support of veterans. Commissioner Mata added that a roundtable is planned in prior to the next VAB public meeting to further discuss issues affecting homeless veterans and Borden Avenue.

Daniel Gonzales from the VA distributed HUD-VASH informational pamphlets during the meeting.

HUD-VASH Staffing Discussion

Dr. Brown asked whether HUD-VASH programs are currently adequately staffed.

Daniel Gonzales responded that the New York VA is sufficiently staffed at this time.

Horng Chou added that DVS has successfully received referrals from Samaritan Village.

Events / Announcements

- Dr. Cleopatra Brown announced event planned for June 12th at Lincoln Terrace Park to honor women veterans.

- Eddie announced an upcoming celebration for the VFW anniversary
 - DVS announced that representatives will attend all dignified transfers in New York City going forward as part of continued support and recognition efforts for deceased veterans and their families.
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- Laurie Windsor from the Office of Rep. Nicole Malliotakis announced the Brooklyn Memorial Day Parade scheduled for Memorial Day, May 25, at 11:00 AM in Bay Ridge.

Closing

Chair and participants thanked attendees for participating in the housing-focused session and encouraged continued engagement regarding veteran housing and support services.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:54 PM.

Next Meeting

Wednesday, June 24, 2026 – Staten Island – Healthcare Focused Session

Location:

Gold Star Post

17 Cannon Ave.

Staten Island, NY 10314

Submitted by:

William Moffat

Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)

Edited by:

[TBD]