

New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB)

2026 Veteran Advisory Board Public Session – Staten Island (Health Care)

Wednesday, June 25, 2026

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

30 attendees

In-Person Location

- American Legion Gold Star Post 1365
- 17 Cannon Avenue
- Staten Island, NY 10314
- 23 in-person attendees

Virtual Access (Microsoft Teams)

- Meeting ID: 219 085 730 642 039
- Passcode: ct9nh2FT
- 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>
- Seven attendees online

Meeting Times

- Meeting Start: 6:00 PM
- Meeting End: 8:00 PM

Members Present –

- 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) – In Person
- Dondi McKellar (Bronx) – Remote

Members Absent

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

Government / Community Representatives

Jordan Hafizi from NYC Council Committee on Veterans Chair Frank Morano's team

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
- Noah Bray (DVS) – Executive Director of Veterans' Support Services
- Horng Chou (DVS) – Deputy Director of Housing and Support Services

Opening

6:00 PM – The meeting was called to order by Dr. Nelson, Vice-Chair, who gave an enthusiastic, warm welcome to all attendees in person and online. She expressed the importance of inclusion and cited a frequent occurrence for Gold Star families of feeling excluded from the conversation about and within the veteran community. She concluded her remarks by stating the VAB is reading and reviewing all comments, concerns and criticisms as they are received and all input received by the VAB from the public will be reviewed and included in the 2026 Annual Report that “we are already working on.”

Ashton added remarks thanking William Moffat for his help as the NYCDVS intern who was a great help at the previous two VAB meetings. He voiced gratitude for his compassion to be part of the veteran advocate community and the VAB wishes him a great summer. He then shared the purpose of the VAB for full transparency, “*The purpose of the board is to serve as a major link between the administration, the New York City Council, the Department of Veteran Services (DVS) and the veteran's community*” and we are here to advise the Dept. based on feedback from the community. He echoed Dr. Nelson stating that housing will be part of the 2026 VAB annual report of recommendations for NYCDVS. Ashton concluded his remarks by stating the topic for today's VAB meeting is health care and Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Strategic Partnerships with the NYC Department of Veterans' Services will be making a presentation.

Dr. Nelson again addressed the VAB meeting, “As we continue to engage and listen to the NYC veteran community to finalize the 2026 Annual Report, it is important that we do not overlook the broader military-connected community. In addition to housing, caregivers and survivors, LGBTQ+ veterans, and women veterans, the report should also address the needs of:

- Military Families
- Military-Connected Community Members
- Gold Star Families
- White Star Families
- Silver Star Families
- Surviving Spouses and Widows/Widowers
- Children of Veterans and Fallen Service Members

- Caregivers of Veterans and Service Members

These populations often face many of the same challenges as veterans, including housing instability, healthcare access, mental health concerns, grief and trauma, educational barriers, and economic hardship. The impact of military service extends beyond the veteran and affects entire families and support systems.

In addition to addressing these needs, New York City should continue to recognize, honor, and celebrate these communities through military branch celebrations, appreciation events, educational programs, networking opportunities, luncheons, resource fairs, and community recognition initiatives. These efforts help ensure military-connected families feel seen, valued, supported, and included.

Dr. Nelson concluded by stating, “A truly comprehensive veteran report must recognize and address the needs of the entire military-connected community, ensuring that no family, caregiver, survivor, spouse, or child is left behind.”

Ryan arrived after he was delayed by traffic and greeted the VAB and attendees thanking Frank LaMarsh and the American Legion Gold Star Post for hosting the meeting.

The VAB then welcomed Commissioner Jesenia Mata for opening remarks.

Commissioner Mata Remarks

Commissioner Mata opened the DVS portion of the meeting and emphasized the importance of bringing her DVS key-staff members to meetings to better understand on-the-ground veteran concerns and community issues directly from veterans and stakeholders. The Commissioner also stressed the importance of intentional, productive, and solutions-oriented discussions during VAB meetings.

Dr. Nelson expressed concerns over discrimination against Gold Star widows and moms. She cited they are often told they are not eligible for benefits and support and disrespected. She also shared she had been disrespected personally at an event to honor her and another Gold Star widow when her late husband was not identified respectfully. Doctor Nelson asked for something to be done to prevent groups from using Gold Star widows for their own gain and adding trauma to grieving families. There is danger and risk of suicide as she has witnessed firsthand and she provided an example. Dr. Nelson also raised serious concerns about the discrimination experienced by Gold Star families. After losing a loved one who served and sacrificed for this country, families should not face further harm from organizations or individuals who claim to support them but fail to treat them with dignity, fairness, and respect.

Dr. Nelson emphasized that this discrimination must stop because it creates additional trauma and interferes with families’ ability to grieve, heal, and remain connected to the military community. It is also one reason many Gold Star families do not feel comfortable

attending programs, events, or community spaces too often, people say one thing publicly but behave differently in practice.

Gold Star families must be treated as a protected and respected demographic, with meaningful safeguards and accountability not merely symbolic recognition. Organizations and companies must closely monitor, properly train, and hold accountable all staff members, contractors, volunteers, and representatives who assist Gold Star, White Star, and Silver Star families.

Healthcare Presentation – Ellen Greeley

Ellen Greeley, Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Strategic Partnerships with the NYC Department of Veterans' Services, delivered a presentation regarding DVS health care operations. Ellen prefaced her presentation stating that the primary focus of the health care operation at DVS is suicide prevention. She cited several successful programs facilitated by DVS including Hello Fresh (to address food insecurity) adding that BVSJ and Campaign Against Hunger, and Gold Star Moms are a great help with preparation and distribution. Food is delivered to the Bronx, Brooklyn VA and several other not for profit organizations. DVS recently started a program called Heros with the Farmers Market.

Ellen described Mission Vet Check as a unique DVS program for those returning home from active duty to ensure they are ready for the transition into civilian life. She stressed that generally speaking, veterans “do not ask for mental health services,” although they may benefit from said services.

Ellen shared information about the military family advocate program where DVS works with school districts and principals to appoint a veteran/family member of a veteran to ensure military families are receiving information about available services. She also mentioned a newsletter created by Dr. Lauren DeMello and shared outwardly. Dr. DeMello also oversees a program promoting veteran support initiatives offered by the New York Public Libraries and all suicide risk referrals to DVS. Additionally, referrals are made to Vets Centers.

Lastly, Ellen shared that the Dwyer Program is entering the 2nd funding cycle and has so far been “wildly successful.”

Ellen closed by restating that these programs provide “some pathways forward in addressing social isolation.”

Audience Q&A

VAB Chair Ryan Graham opened the floor to in-person questions. Attendee Tim Pena asked if food insecurity services at NYCDVS are offered to homeless veterans on the street. Ellen answered, yes but food has to be picked up from one of the Hello Fresh distribution locations. Distribution is also overseen through partners at the Jericho Project in the Bronx and BVSJ in Brooklyn.

Jordan Hafizi from NYC Council Committee on Veterans Chair Frank Morano's team shared an event planned by the Councilman, "Stars, Stripes & Staten Island: America 250 Celebration," taking place on July 8, 2026 from 5:00 PM – 10:00 PM at the Conference House, Staten Island: <https://council.nyc.gov/frank-morano/councilman-moranos-250th-anniversary-celebration/>

Jordan also shared that a veteran service officer is available at the Councilman's office the second Wednesday of each month through the Paul Valone Initiative (for more information contact 2955 Veterans Road West, Suite 2E. Staten Island, NY 10309 (718) 984-5151).

Note: these services are available at Council Districts throughout the City. You can look up your representative district information here:

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/d826b115c87841d491c2b41fcb175305>

VAB Chair Ryan Graham welcomed all board members asking them to introduce themselves (both in person and online) and shared some of his own history including his struggle with homelessness prior to entering the military. Ryan addressed Tim Pena, founder of Veterans Justice Project, who expressed dissatisfaction with advocacy for veterans at Borden Avenue Veterans Residence at the April VAB meeting, stating he wants to work with him. Tim shared that he does not recall anything about the last VAB meeting that was focused on housing but attributed his comments to his PTSD and his health.

Eva, a friend of Mr. Pena shared her comments about Borden Avenue Veterans Residence (BAVR) as the divorcee of a Vietnam Veteran who earned a Purple Heart who had severe PTSD. She said his struggle is what inspired her to support veterans at BAVR by providing donations once a month. Eva reported that upon a recent donation delivery to BAVR she learned that due to a bug infestation, all bed sheets had to be burned. She added that she witnessed a veteran was covered with bugs and crawling on the ground.

Eva said she has seen veterans strung out on drugs, suffering with unaddressed mental health needs and reported rape of a BAVR staff member by a veteran. Eva concluded that BAVR residents are in significant need of additional support and other essentials such as snacks, towels, and beverages. These serious allegations were noted by the VAB and heard by DVS Commissioner Mata and her team. Ryan reassured Eva (and Tim) that all shared info will be included in the 2026 recommendations to DVS. Ashton added that he has successfully appealed to the New York State Department of Veterans' Services (NYSDVS) to begin a pilot program to provide a VSO (Veteran Service Officer) to BAVR twice a month to meet with facility residents to discuss services available to veterans including service-connected disability, employment, education, housing, Restoration of Honor for eligible veterans possessing an Other Than Honorable discharge, etc. For more about NYSDVS: <https://veterans.ny.gov/>

***Post VAB meeting:** On 7/8/2026 Ashton emailed NYSDVS, Tim Pena, NYSDVS, and Ray Wade from BVSJ, Inc. to coordinate in-person appointments with BAVR residents and a NYSDVS VSO in a rented office space (managed by Mr. Pena) adjacent to the facility. NYSDVS confirmed via email on the same date. Ray Wade

from BVSJ, Inc. was included in the conversation as he is scheduled to meet with BAVR residents every Tuesday, 9AM-12PM beginning on 7/21/2026. NYSDVS was invited to accompany Mr. Wade during the time he will be on site.

Ryan then turned to several raised hands from attendees on Teams and called upon Jerry Chan. Jerry said he had forgotten his question as he raised his hand “over an hour ago.” Jerry said he is a veteran and he is unclear about the function of the VAB. Ryan answered by explaining the VAB serves to advise the DVS through feedback and questions received from public VAB meetings. Jerry also asked what is being done to help veterans with mental health challenges and suggested NYC Health and Hospitals play a larger role in providing this support. Daniella mentioned the DVS program Mission Vet Check that is designed to provide check-ins with recent post-military veterans.

VAB member Frank LaMarsh stated, “I heard a lot of passionate statements tonight, but not one suggestion was made.” Frank explained that while he was commander of The American Legion Department of New York, he would ask members of his team to always present concerns with a suggested solution. He encouraged attendees to think more about the issues they see in the veteran space and present them with suggestions to the VAB so they can be included in the advisement provided to the DVS in the next annual report.

Denis commended Ellen and the DVS team for the food program adding that he had taken his students to at Queens College.

Closing

Ryan invited Commissioner Mata to “close us out.” The Commissioner commended her DVS team and said she “took a lot of notes from this evening’s meeting, especially on the topic of housing.”

Chair and participants thanked attendees for participating in the health care-focused session and encouraged continued engagement.

A question from Joe Bello appeared in the chat but was not addressed during the meeting. Mr. Bello asked, “will the VAB recording from the last meeting be made available online?”

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:59 PM.

Next Meeting

Wednesday, September (date TBD) – Brooklyn (location TBD)

Topic of focus: Employment

Location: TBD

Submitted by,

Ashton Stewart,
Secretary, Veteran Advisory Board