

# **NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD 2025 ANNUAL REPORT**



Photo Credit: <https://www.uwvc.org/news-and-events/recaps/2025-nyc-veterans-day-parade>

## **NEW YORK CITY VETERANS' ACHIEVEMENTS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

*“We must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” – **President John F. Kennedy***

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

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**To:** New York City Mayor Zohran K. Mamdani  
NYC Council Speaker Julie Menin  
**Cc:** Deputy Mayor Dr. Helen Arteaga  
Councilmember Frank Morano, Chair, NYC Council Veterans Committee

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Mayor Mamdani and Council Speaker Menin,

Submitted for your review is the New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) end of the year report for 2025.

The purpose of the VAB 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. This report highlights the culmination of progress and concerns veterans shared over five hybrid sessions through the NYC VAB Public Sessions, held in each Borough as required by the NYC Charter Bylaws, to advise the Commissioner of the DVS on all matters concerning veterans – those on Active Duty, Reserve and Guard components of the military services here in New York City.

As an Advisory Committee we host the public sessions in order to provide our city's veterans with a voice to express their concerns, provide input regarding issues impacting the veteran community, present resources available to our veterans and provide feedback to our elected officials on areas of improvement the city currently provides.

This report includes the dates for the public sessions for 2026, which will continue to be held on a hybrid platform to allow maximum participation from our constituents. Dates and locations for the 2026 sessions are included in this report. This report also shares the recommendations of the VAB to the elected officials governing our city's veterans and to DVS.

We are publishing this document with our report in the interest of transparency with the community.

Thank you for your attention to the veterans of New York City. The VAB stands ready to work with you to improve the quality and level of services for all New Yorkers, especially our veterans. Please direct any questions or concerns to my email at: [MEliasVABNYC@gmail.com](mailto:MEliasVABNYC@gmail.com).

Mercedes Elias  
Chair

## NEW YORK CITY VETERANS ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

As of December 31, 2025, three of eleven board members have completed their term on the board. In 2025, we welcomed five new board members appointed by the Mayor and the City Council, which included the addition of a gold star family member. One Mayoral appointment has an expired term.

Board Member	Borough	Email (@gmail.com)	Term Expires	Appointment
Mercedes Elias Chair	Queens	MEliasVABNYC	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Ryan Graham Vice Chair	Queens	RGrahamVABNYC	August 2, 2026	Council
Wendy McClinton	Brooklyn	WMcClintonVABNYC	November 2, 2028	Council
Andrew Walcott	Brooklyn	AWalcottVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Council
Linda Ollis	Staten Island	LOllisVABNYC	<i>Expired</i>	Mayor
Marisa Estrella	Bronx	MEstrellaVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Mayor
Diego Rubio	Manhattan	DRubioVABNYC	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Josh Sooklal	Manhattan	JSooklalVABNYC	February 16, 2027	Mayor
Ashton Stewart	Manhattan	AStewartVABNYC	October 27, 2027	Council
Mecca Nelson	Staten Island	DrMNelsonVABNYC	February 23, 2028	Council
Frank LaMarsh	Staten Island	FLaMarshVABNYC	August 22, 2026	Mayor
Dondi McKellar	Bronx	DMcKellarVABNYC	November 2, 2028	Council
Dennis Torres	Brooklyn	DTorresVABNYC	November 2, 2028	Council

### Outgoing Board Members

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.

Paul Dietrich	Staten Island	PDietrichVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Mayor
John Rowan	Queens	JRowanVABNYC	<i>Term Completed</i>	Council
Brendan Gibbons	Queens	BGibbonsVABNYC	<i>Relocated</i>	Council

## LOCAL VETERAN POLICIES AND RESOURCES

Starting in 2024 and continuing in 2025, the VAB continued to streamline the focus of the public sessions to ensure we adhered to the priorities detailed in the NYC Charter and highlighted the charter areas established for DVS: Benefits, Housing, Healthcare, Education, Employment and Culture. This focus helps DVS maintain its mission to connect, mobilize and empower New York City's Veteran community in order to foster purpose-driven lives for US military service members – past and present – in addition to their caregivers, survivors and families. The public sessions also offer veteran advocates an opportunity to share resources meant to support the human service and other needs of the veteran and military population and incentivize DVS to further collaboration with these advocates and the groups they represent.

### 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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. The VAB encourages veterans to attend and take active roles in their local Community Boards as a pathway to build deeper civic engagement.

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 2025 AND PLANS FOR 2026

Below is a summary of the key activities for 2025:

**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.

**2026 Meeting Schedule:** We have scheduled the 2026 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	Charter Area
Wed Feb 25	Manhattan	Benefits
Wed April 29	Queens	Housing
Wed June 24	Staten Island	Healthcare
Wed Sept 16	Bronx	Education
Wed Oct 28	Brooklyn	Employment

**Engaged with DVS, City Council, and the Veteran Community on Strategic Priorities and Policies Relating to Veterans in New York City:** The VAB strengthened its engagement with DVS, the City Council, and the broader veteran community to help shape strategic priorities and policies affecting veterans in New York City. Through regular coordination with these key stakeholders, the VAB helped elevate critical issues and inform resource allocation. This work included meetings with elected officials and direct outreach to members of the veteran community. VAB members also increased their participation in City Council oversight hearings to ensure that veterans' needs were clearly represented. In 2025, the City Council began holding more consistent hearings on veterans-related issues, providing additional opportunities for VAB members to testify when available. To further strengthen accountability and demonstrate sustained engagement, future reporting should track VAB member attendance and participation at hearings beginning in 2026.

**Establish Key Performance Indicators:** A key priority for 2025 is for DVS to develop clear key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure outcomes beyond initial intake for veterans seeking services and support. In addition, implementing a structured "feedback loop" for referrals would help ensure that referring parties are notified—within appropriate privacy limits—when a veteran has been contacted. These improvements

would enhance transparency, better inform the public, and support data-driven decision-making to allocate resources to the most effective programs. The VAB will continue to collaborate closely with DVS staff to align strategic initiatives and ensure all stakeholders have the information and support needed to achieve these goals.

**Actions Taken on the 2024 End of Year Report:** Several recommendations from the prior year's report to the Mayor and City Council were addressed through revisions to the VAB's ByLaws rather than the codification of new policies. The outgoing Chair, in collaboration with the former Commissioner, led the development of these updates—the first comprehensive revision since 2017. The revisions have been submitted to the new Commissioner and Chair of the VAB. Updated revisions include:

- Incorporation of immediate family members, survivors or caregivers of veterans to the VAB
- Updated replacement appointment timelines in accordance with Local Law 19 of 2022
- Attendance requirement for members of the VAB
- Establishing responsibilities of DVS and VAB

## 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.

### **Processing of PFC Dwyer Veterans' Support Program Grants**

The PFC Dwyer program was established in the New York State budget to help veterans cope with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). In 2024, the program was made available through DVS and experienced a significant delay in approval and reimbursement of funds. This delay has caused a severe delay in services available to our service members. We believe this is due to a process error, having applications requiring approval at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to distribute the funds first to the NY State office of mental health to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene at the city level, then to DVS. There were significant delays when processing the funds, therefore we recommend a review of the current grant and procurement process to ensure the funds are distributed in a timely manner. Veteran advocates noted the need to identify an appropriate point of contact in the application instructions which would help to ensure the timely processing of grants and support appropriate oversight of the process.

### **Invest in Resources to Encourage and Support Veteran Engagement in the**

**Political Process:** Consistent with our guiding principle of supporting veterans' continued service as citizens, DVS has frequently briefed the opportunity for veterans to sit on their local community boards. We recommend that members of the administration and city council work with city officials to help recruit veterans to sit on their local community boards and engage in active participation with the political process at all levels. There have been significant improvements to ensure communication is disseminated regarding City Council Committee on Veterans oversight hearings on issues impacting veterans. This is a combined effort, with DVS pushing out information via their social media channels and the staff within City Council ensuring local leaders are notified of upcoming hearings. This allows veterans have a voice regarding hearings impacting our community and continued engagement will reinforce the commitment by our elected leaders to support the veteran community.

### **Increased Funding for DVS**

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. DVS remains one of the smallest agencies in the city, operating with less than one percent of the City budget. However, in the past 10 years of its existence it has increased the number of services to its constituents, including housing, mental health, continuing education and employment issues amongst others. Increased funding would

allow the agency to:

- **Scale operations:** In order for the department to scale their operations and develop sustainable long-term goals, their budget must also be increased to meet the demands of the veterans currently residing in NYC and those returning after their time in service. Additional funding will also allow DVS to directly provide services to veterans as opposed to referring them to other city agencies, non-profit partners, and community-based organizations which currently fill resource and service gaps.
- **Provide non-digital support services:** Currently, 53% of NYC's veteran population is over the age of 64, therefore the current means for communication via social media and digital communication is not ideal for this demographic. DVS provides assistance within each borough via the Veteran Resource Centers, however due to their limited staff they are only able to provide limited days and hours for accessibility. Increased funding will allow greater accessibility for veterans employed full-time to ensure that services are provided and information on the city's resources are appropriately disseminated. In addition, additional funding would support communication outreach in the form of radio ads, print communications, and targeted newsletters for older populations.
- **Evaluation and documentation of programming:** In order to ensure trust with our community and full transparency, we call upon the administration and the City Council to provide proper funding specifically dedicated to evaluating and documenting programs including:
  - o **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.
  - o **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. Oversight of DVS' "VetConnectNYC" portal has changed service providers within the past

year, therefore it is imperative that appropriate tracking mechanisms are in place to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of this tool as the primary source of data for veteran intake requests. The system needs an appropriate level of funding to ensure it has the appropriate amount of physical and digital infrastructure required for the amount of data needed to compile these analytics.

**Increase Veteran Vendors' Inclusion on the Street Vendor Advisory Board:** Street vending is New York City's oldest entrepreneurial venture for veterans going back to 1894 when New York State legislators enacted 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 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.

**Funding and Resources for Student Veterans:** 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). Private institutions have achieved a high amount of success in recruiting veterans and providing support services. The same cannot be said for all the institutions within the CUNY school system. Advocates for student veterans have stated that funding for CUNY schools are dispersed via the central office of Veterans Affairs, however each institution would like more autonomy and requests the schools be allocated the funding the each campus based on enrollment levels. This ensures a fair and equitable support for institutions who have a more robust and effective office of military affairs. We believe that by providing an equal level of support across the CUNY system, NYC can attract more student veterans to not only learn from but eventually become employed post-graduation. Another barrier to students wanting to pursue higher education within NYC is the cost of living associated, specifically for public institutions that do not provide student housing. We recommend innovative housing solutions for the students attending these institutions in order to attract and retain more student veterans.

**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 training and 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.

## LEGISLATION AND PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

### PENDING LEGISLATION FOR APPROVAL

Many of the items listed below are previous recommendations made which have had action taken to *introduce* the items via the appropriate channels yet have still not been approved. The listed items below are significant measures which, when approved, would show meaningful support from our elected officials to address the needs of the veteran community.

**Establish a Preference for New York City to Contract with Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Businesses:** Federal and State governments 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. For many years the VAB has recommended that a contracting preference be offered for Veteran owned businesses by the city as is done at the Federal and State level as well as a large portion of larger corporations.

- **Intro. 0685-2024:** Council member Robert F. Holden, Chair of the Veterans Committee filed Intro. 0685-2024 on March 19, 2024. 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.
  - **Bill Status:** Initial bill (Intro. 0476-2022) did not make it past committees and filed December 31, 2023; reintroduced as 0685-2024 on March 19, 2024, and "Referred to Finance Pursuant to Rule 9.10" on December 18, 2025, during the final NYC Council Stated Meeting of 2025. (<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6584152&GUID=ADF08D77-9D73-4C7A-B85E-608F9B5D2323>)
  - **Recommendation:** Reintroduction of new bill should be amended to state "Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Business" (SDVOB) in the language of the bill. While the federal government and New York State offer contracting preferences to both MWBE and SDVOB designations, New York City only has offers preferences to MWBE.

**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.

- **Intro. 0686-2024:** Council member Robert F. Holden, Chair of the Veterans Committee, introduced and filed Intro. 0686-2024, 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.
  - **Bill Status:** Initial bill (Intro. 1213-2023) did not make it past committees and filed December 31, 2023; reintroduced as 0686-2024 on March 19, 2024, and "Referred to Finance Pursuant to Rule 9.10" on December 18, 2025, during the final NYC Council Stated Meeting of 2025.  
(<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6584147&GUID=199CD7BA-3C5A-43F5-AFD3-756EC1A65172>)
- **Intro. 0687-2024:** Council member Robert F. Holden, Chair of the Veterans Committee, introduced and filed Intro. 0687-2024 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.
  - **Bill Status:** Initial bill (Intro. 1214-2023) did not make it past committees and filed December 31, 2023; reintroduced as 0687-2024 on March 19, 2024, and "Referred to Finance Pursuant to Rule 9.10" on December 18, 2025, during the final NYC Council Stated Meeting of 2025.  
(<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6584146&GUID=00C36323-C975-4D46-81AD-9BF5F112FFFA>)

**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 to other municipalities and states. **BILL PASSED INTO LAW.**

- **Intro. 0740-2024:** Councilmember David Carr introduced Intro. 0740-2024, 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.

- **Bill Status:** Initial bill (Intro. 0377-2022), introduced by Councilmember Joseph C. Borelli, did not make it past committees and filed December 31, 2023; reintroduced as 0740-2024 on April 11, 2024, and passed by New York City Council on November 11, 2025.  
(<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6632242&GUID=86AD5EBB-5A32-4164-88A4-293ED766EFF5>)

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO DVS

### **Documented Tracking on Progress from Previous Recommendations**

In order to ensure that the department is serving as good stewards of the funds allocated for veterans, numerous issues were frequently raised during the public sessions which we feel requires specific reporting:

**Claims Processing:** Navigating the Federal VA bureaucracy to access benefits for which a veteran qualifies is difficult. During 2024, DVS appointed a full-time employee to run the claims team. 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 to the New York City economy. During our public session, it was brought to our attention that there was a backlog of applications for assistance when the team was established. The team has had a full year to obtain metrics to track the success of their program. ***We recommend that detailed metrics regarding the number of submissions, approvals, and financial impact to the city be tracked to ensure the efficiency and success of the program. This continues to be an area of concern for the newly appointed Commissioner to be aware of.***

**Discretionary 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. 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. ***A detailed review of this process is requested to validate that those organizations seeking funding are able to receive this in a timely manner and to identify any issues with approval or processing. In addition, an assessment as to the value gained from the service provided for the contract should also be taken into account.***