

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**NYC Receives Federal Government Award for Mental Health Program for New York's Veterans**

*Dedicated volunteers have made more than 36,000 individual phone calls to NYC Veterans so far*

**New York** – The New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) has received the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award for its "Mission: VetCheck" program on behalf of New York State. The award was presented by VA Secretary Denis McDonough to DVS Commissioner James Hendon and Viviana DeCohen, Director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services, at the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs Mid-Winter Conference in Alexandria, Virginia.

"Social-isolation and mental health issues touched every individual and family across the city during the pandemic," said **New York City Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Anne Williams-Isom**. "This program takes special care to reach out to the military Veterans among us to connect them to services if needed and communicate that we as individuals, and we as a city, care for them. To every veteran across the city: We are thankful for your service, and we are here to support you — one phone call at a time. Thank you to the Department of Veterans' Services, the Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health, and every person that picked up a phone to dial their fellow New Yorker."

"This program illustrates the power of community and collaboration. When our city was facing its darkest hours, active-duty service members and volunteers came forward to make sure NYC's Veterans didn't feel alone," said **New York City Department of Veterans' Services Commissioner James Hendon**. "We are grateful to the VA for recognizing the hard work and cross-sector partnership that went into this ongoing initiative."

"Mission: VetCheck highlighted the importance of supportive check-ins during a time of great isolation during the Covid-19 crisis," said **Tina Chiu and Jason Hansman, Acting Co-Directors for the Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health**. "This initiative, in partnership with our office, harnessed the power of volunteers to make tens of thousands of supportive phone calls to Veterans at risk of social isolation connecting them with volunteers to help them access services. We are proud of the success of this initiative and congratulate NYC Department of Veterans' Services and all who worked on Mission: VetCheck on this important award."

"Mission: VetCheck" is a program that grew out of a collaboration between DVS and the Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The program leverages local volunteers to make compassionate, supportive check-in phone calls to Veterans and their families. It first launched in May of 2020 to engage with the Veteran community and assess their needs during the height of the pandemic. Volunteers were trained to provide information about resources including Covid-19 testing locations, rental assistance, free meals, and other essential public services.

Phone calls were initially made by members of the New York National Guard during the first phase of the project, then volunteers were recruited and trained through a partnership with New York Cares. The program remains operational today thanks to continued support from New York Cares and is now leveraged as a tool to regularly check-in on the general wellbeing of the NYC Veteran community. To date, more than 36,000 individual phone calls have been placed by a dedicated team of volunteers. Almost a quarter of the Veterans whom volunteers have been able to speak with have been referred to additional support services.

The Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award was established in 2012 by the VA to evaluate state programs, establish best practices, and highlight the great work being done at the state level.

“We extend our congratulations to our partners at the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services for receiving the Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award acknowledging their work and dedication on such a necessary and important program like Mission: VetCheck, said **Director of the New York State Division of Veterans’ Services Viviana DeCohen**. “We look forward to continuing our fruitful collaboration together in serving New York’s Veterans, Service members, and their families.”

“At the height of the pandemic, the NYC Department of Veterans Services made sure that our city’s Veterans were not forgotten through the Mission: VetCheck Program,” said **Rahel Semegn, Director of Community Relations at New York Cares**. “Through this important partnership, our volunteers were trained to make thousands of phone calls to local Veterans to help fulfill their essential needs and offer a friendly voice during such a difficult time.”

If you are a Veteran who would like to receive a supportive check-in call, or if you are volunteer who would like to support Mission: VetCheck, please visit [www.nyc.gov/vetcheck](http://www.nyc.gov/vetcheck). You can also call DVS at (212) 416-5250 or email [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov).

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### About the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services

The NYC Department of Veterans’ Services’ mission is to connect, mobilize, and empower New York City’s Veteran community to foster purpose-driven lives for US Military Service Members—past and present—in addition to their caregivers, survivors, and families. We assist NYC Veteran community members on issues that include, but are not limited to: employment, housing, food security, wellbeing, benefits, culture, and targeted advocacy. For more information, visit [www.nyc.gov/vets](http://www.nyc.gov/vets), call (212) 416-5250, email [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov), or follow us on social media @nycveterans.