

New York City Veterans Advisory Board

Minutes for the April 19, 2023 meeting held hybrid (virtually and in person at York College) representing the meeting for Queens

Members

Present:

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| Wendy McClinton (Brooklyn) | Todd Haskins (Manhattan) |
| Mercedes Elias (Queens) | John Rowan (Queens) |
| Andrew Walcott (Brooklyn) | Linda Ollis (Staten Island) |

Absent:

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| Charles Hernandez (Bronx) | Paul Dietrich (Staten Island) |
| Jennifer Kamrowski (Manhattan) | Peter Kauffmann (Queens) |

Note: Awaiting board member to be appointed by Speaker's Office.

Minutes

- Wendy McClinton (Chair) commenced the meeting at 6:00 pm.

Thanked everyone for attending both in person and on the call. Began meeting by having Veterans Advisory Board members introduce themselves and turned it over to DVS staff to introduce themselves. Chair introduces Craig Caruana representing Council member Robert Holden's office, Chair of Veterans Committee.

Old business: Mr. Caruana discussed the civil hearing on veteran students at CUNY and trying to improve the CUNY system for veterans. Legislation has been introduced to have every community board have a veteran sub-committee as discussed during the last meeting. Another bill will have a hearing that allows you to identify as a veteran when applying for contracts from the city. Should the Speaker choose, the council could vote on both of those bills. Regarding veteran vendors, there are dedicated representatives at DCWP and DOH who speak with vendors regularly helping to increase communication between the city and the vendors. At Chair Holden's office (Queens), they now have a dedicated DVS representative on site roughly twice a month who is a certified benefits specialist to assist with VA benefit cases. Office is pushing for every member of the council to get a designated amount of funding to distribute to veterans' organizations, expanding access to city funding opportunities to these organizations. Introducing legislation to have fines waived for a 120-day cure period if there is damage to buildings such as American Legions or VFW halls who provide services to veterans.

- VAB board member Todd Haskins asked for an update on veteran attendance at CUNY schools, and if they have had success or if there is a decrease.
 - o Response: Craig Caruana stated the 20% drop in attendance is what precipitated the hearing on student veterans. The office is waiting to see what the up-to-date numbers are and to see if the large drop was due to the pandemic.
- Todd Haskins asked why there is only a designation as a veteran for vendors as opposed to a preference for veteran vendors.
 - o Response: Mr. Caruana stated they were told they were legally not allowed to do that. NY state would have to grant them the authority to do that, which they have not done, and it may create a conflict with civil rights laws. Mr. Haskins clarified that if veterans are included in the definition of minority as a protected class, that they can be included in the preference.
- Mr. Haskins asked about updated appointment letters for VAB members.
 - o Response: Mr. Caruana stated two recommendations were made to the speaker and they will follow up on the recommendations.
- Mr. Haskins asked about a meeting with the speaker that has been requested since 2015 but not conducted.
 - o Response: Mr. Caruana stated he does not know if the council member is aware of that and will bring it to his attention.

Presentation:

Chair Wendy McClinton introduces Commissioner Hendon to share Department of Veteran Services (DVS) updates.

Commissioner Hendon briefs an update on the Joseph P. Dwyer program to support veteran wellness programs. Received an RFI from 21 organizations, after review will conduct a formal Request For Proposal (RFP) process to distribute funds. Commissioner then covered Get Covered NYC (Text 55676) for those looking for healthcare through the VA or Obamacare. Commissioner turns it Jason Loughran who briefed upcoming budget hearing on May 8 at 2:30 pm. Then turns it over to Pedro Zapata, Senior Policy Analyst who briefed upcoming Fleet Week events, Veteran Business Leadership Association upcoming JFK summit for veteran business owners, an event for franchisees, and transition summit at CitiField. Commissioner then turns it over to Dr. D'Mello who briefed about the NYC Mental Health Coalition – mental healthcare providers who meet once a month to discuss mental health issues and treatments for veterans. Commissioner opens the floor for questions.

Public Comments: The following comments were submitted to the board during the virtual meeting and were addressed throughout the course of the meeting. Both questions and responses are provided.

Paul Dietrich (submitted prior): Has DVS developed a feedback system for veterans referred to them to acknowledge they are receiving some sort of treatment?

- Response: Jason Loughran stated DVS is taking steps to improve the customer experience but they are required to get approval from client to share data with whoever referred them. In UniteUs portal they use, the consent process is embedded.

Second question: currently VSO's must fill out a property tax exemption annually, is there any way to address this with the city?

- Response: Commissioner stated he will address it with the Commissioner of Finance.

Joe Bello: Brought up that the May 8th budget hearing was not on the council's website. Addressed the Dwyer program and what type of programs would be getting funding, if a VAB member would be on the review board for organizations submitting to get funding, and how are they collecting data for the program?

- Response: Commissioner Hendon responds stated a VAB member would be on the committee to determine who will receive funding, and that the committee will be gathering data as they submit RFPs.

Craig Caruana stated it wasn't posted until they got official approval for it.

Second question: Asked why they didn't have an outside organization such as Peer to Peer didn't handle the process similar to how they conduct it in Suffolk County.

- Response: Commissioner stated it was his decision to allow each VSO to have a seat at the table vying for the resources.

Third question: After conferring with veteran vendors stated that the Commissioner committed to created a VBLA for vendors and where is that at?

- Response: Commissioner stated they are still working on establishing it.

Fourth question: Asked who is taking over for community and claims.

- Response: Jason responded deputy commissioner Garcia will be stepping in to help.

Fifth question: Asked about claims representatives and status of them.

- Response: Commissioner stated they are coordinating with Dr. D'Mello to place resources in the correct locations.

Chair McClinton then introduces presenters for the evening. The first is Dondi McKellar and Benjamin Solotaire, discussing the NYC Civic Engagement Commission and the participatory budget. Next presenter is Amy Wegel from Zeel, in-home massage provider for the VA.

Wendy stated there is an issue with veteran vendors who want to own a cannabis dispensary and asked for feedback on that from DVS. Jason Loughran addressed the issue and stated this is managed by the state's office on cannabis management and that there are so far two veterans who have been granted licenses if they would like to ask them how they obtained approval. Jason also stated the city is setting up a Cannabis policy advisory commission.

The NYC Department of Veterans' Services can be reached at www.nyc.gov/vets, 212-416-5250, connect@veterans.nyc.gov, and / or [@nycveterans](https://www.instagram.com/nycveterans) on social media.

Meeting adjourned.

Next meeting: 6 pm June 7, 2023 in Staten Island.

Submitted by: Mercedes Elias, Secretary