

# New York City Veterans Advisory Board

Minutes for the June 8, 2022 meeting held virtually and in person at  
Sgt Michael Labetti Veterans of Foreign Wars Post, 390 Hylan Blvd, Staten Island, NY 10305  
representing the meeting for Staten Island

## Members

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### Present:

Mercedes Elias – in person (Queens)  
Peter Kauffmann (Queens)  
Todd Haskins (Manhattan)

Paul Dietrich – in person (Staten Island)  
Joe Bello (Bronx)

### Absent:

Charles Hernandez (Bronx)  
Andrew Walcott (Brooklyn)  
John Rowan (Queens)

Wendy McClinton (Brooklyn)  
Jennifer Kamrowski (Manhattan)

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

## Minutes

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- Mercedes Elias (Secretary) commenced the meeting at 6:00 pm.

Craig Caruana opened the meeting to provide updates from CM Holden's office. Craig stated that a formal petition was submitted against the closing of the VA facilities in NYC. There are two bills being presented that require testimony – Intro 476 requiring Department of Small Business Services (SBS) 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. Bill would also require SBS along with DVS to create a Veteran's Leadership Advisory program to educate veterans on how to apply for government contracts. (Intro 476:

<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5669020&GUID=28098E90-12B5-40F6-8A62-0A447747F889>) The second bill being presented, Intro 394, would require each

Community Board to establish a committee dedicated to the needs of veterans and their families. (Intro 394:

<https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5656516&GUID=F1750EC0-1261-42F7-82E8-54DB81704C13&Options=&Search=>).

CM Holden is also proposing a veteran designated to participate in the budget process to help direct funding to organizations.

Mercedes opened the meeting and asked VAB representatives to introduce themselves. Mercedes turned the meeting over to Bruce Tucker, Interim Medical Director for the NY Harbor

Healthcare and Rosemary Cancel-Santiago, Acting Director of the Bronx VA to give updates on post COVID procedures for the VA.

**Presentation:**

Bruce Tucker briefed that the AIR commission has not been fully established, therefore there are no updates to the recommendation from last time. The following updates to VA procedures are in place at NY Harbor:

- 1) Masking is still required in all facilities
- 2) Moving forward with face-to-face appointments with providers and specialists, currently at 75-80% of pre-COVID numbers
- 3) Will be purchasing shuttles to help with transportation using the harbor as a hub
- 4) Construction updates to improve lighting in parking lots (primarily in Brooklyn and Queens)
- 5) Updating wiring and fixing elevators throughout facilities

Heroes on the Hudson and Pedals of Honor briefed by Jonathan Glasberg, which utilizes adaptive sports to help veterans cope with injuries and disabilities. Bruce requested that any events they would like VA staff to do outreach at to let Lyn Johnson know, who can be emailed at [lyn.johnson2@va.gov](mailto:lyn.johnson2@va.gov).

Mercedes turns over to Rosemary to brief updates at Bronx VA:

- 1) Phase 5 – face to face visits are encouraged however masking is still required
- 2) New mental health inpatient unit is slated to open at the end of quarter two 2023
- 3) Upgrading and constructing new sterile processing unit, replacing imaging equipment, and updating electronic records equipment
- 4) Replacing windows in building, upgrading spinal cord injury center, fully renovating the emergency department
- 5) Repairing parking garages and gym

Rosemary briefed the horticulture therapy provided. Mercedes opened the floor to participants to ask questions for the directors (listed below in public comments).

Mercedes ends questions for VA directors and turns the floor over to Commissioner Hendon to cover DVS initiatives. Starts by addressing issues raised by VAB:

- 1) Joseph P. Dwyer program – program to push money out into communities to support peer to peer engagement between veterans, regardless of discharge status. NYC will receive \$550,000. The goal will be for DVS to warehouse money and distribute. Once he confirms they can control the funding, will work to distribute funds to organizations who meet the spirit of the program.
- 2) Charter mandated areas and priorities – assist and inform veteran community. The number one priority this year is assisting veterans with their benefits and specifically the VA claims process. The second priority is employment, which includes entrepreneurship. Third priority addressed education and attracting veterans to the city. An enduring priority is mental health.

- 3) Jason Loughran (in-person), Assistant Commissioner, Community Services briefs about Fleet Week. Total of 3,500 active duty service members in NYC over the course of six days. Calculated per diem and spending resulted in approximately \$1.6 million in revenue to the city.
- 4) Ellen Greely (in-person), Assistant Commissioner, Policy and Strategic Partnerships addressed staffing changes within DVS. Latisha Russow moved to Texas and has been replaced by Nicole Jordan Jones, the new Assistant Commissioner for Outreach. Bianca Vitale will join as Senior Policy Analyst. Losing benefits coordinator and will look to apply to replace.
- 5) Ellen also briefed on upcoming events. June 15<sup>th</sup> the Got Your Six conference with the Bob Woodruff Foundation to discuss emerging issues within the veteran community. Building furniture-thon with \$50,000 grant from the Pen Fed Foundation on July 9<sup>th</sup> and July 23<sup>rd</sup> in the Bronx Aug 6<sup>th</sup> and Aug 27<sup>th</sup> in Juniper Valley Park with CM Holden and CM Dinowitz. Looking for Veteran Service Organizations to come out to assist.

Mercedes opens the floor for any questions for DVS (listed below in public comments). Mercedes and DVS discussed recruiting younger veterans to the city via the ETS sponsorship program as well as other bills currently going through Congress requiring service members to be enrolled in VA healthcare before they leave active duty.

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

**Dierdre Rice-Reese:** (Regarding the Heroes on the Hudson brief) Is there any information on support for veterans with substance use disorder (SUD)?

- Response: Jonathan Glasberg stated that veterans with SUD are eligible to participate in this event.

**Steven Merced:** (Regarding the G.R.O.W. program at the Bronx VA) Can any veteran sign up for it or just high-risk veterans?

- Response: Rosemary Cancel-Santiago responded that the program is open to any veteran.

**Paul Dietrich:** Is there any plan to restart transportation from clinic in Staten Island to Brooklyn VA?

- Response: Bruce Tucker stated no planned changes on the DAV van and that the only plan is to change from vans to shuttles.

(Directed to DVS): There is no longer a veterans representative in Staten Island, can you tell us who to contact for veterans to get a claim processed?

- Response: Jason Loughran stated Lamar Wheeler will be visiting weekly to help assist with claims.

**Name Unknown (in person attendee):** Is there going to be additional transportation to Brooklyn and Manhattan VA from Staten Island?

- Response: Bruce Tucker stated no planned expansion for van servicing times but is going to take back the feedback to see what assistance can be provided.

**Name Unknown (in person attendee)**: Regarding the AIR Commission recommendation, is there a timeframe for this to get approved?

- Response: Bruce Tucker responded that the commission has not been established by Congress. Once it is established can take up to a year to come up with recommendations and complete the process which would be 5-10 years down the road.

**Jason Loughran**: Will the VA be extending the community care program? If we run into partners that want to join the program, where can we direct them?

- Response: Bruce Tucker responded they do it through the third-party vendor, currently they are only planning to do it for mammography. The only reason to expand would be for something they don't provide in house.

**Ricardo Garcia**: In regard to the caregiver program, legacy caregiver participants expanded to Vietnam and Korean war veterans however budget was not allocated to cover the expansion. OIF and OEF veterans are being removed from the program to give money to older veterans and want to know why the budget wasn't increased to support the expanded groups and what is the recourse for veterans kicked out of the program?

- Response: Bruce Tucker responded that every VA across the country was supposed to assess how it would impact their veterans to determine legacies and determine who would be removed. 3-4 weeks ago, they received direction to contact legacies and put all removals on hold.

(To DVS) What would be the availability to do a census in the city and the state?

- Response: Commissioner Hendon stated they just put out a survey of the community. He would like to see what they can add to the survey to gather census data and wants to work with Department of Defense to get better estimate on all veterans in the city.

**Rivera**: Attention needed at Borden Ave housing.

**Samuel Cottes**: What can Cold War veterans do to get credit for their property tax exemption?

- Response: Commissioner Hendon responded that the current exemption in NYC is for combat veterans and does not extend to Cold War veterans for background. DVS is trying to work internally to get it expanded to include Cold War generation.

Can DVS get involved for Reserve and Guard to be eligible as well?

- Response: Commissioner Hendon responded they are trying to get eligibility expanded for everyone. Paul Vallone added that veterans should apply to department of finance regardless for the exemption.

**Susan Wallace**: State licensing and city licensing issues for veterans coming to NYC and getting them activated after transferring to New York. The State is making it easier for military spouses to transfer the licenses but not service members or veterans.

- Response: Commissioner Hendon responds that he will share the information with the State DVS.

Suggests creating a task force to oppose the AIR commission recommendations to ‘attack it in a methodical way.’

**Colon:** The city is saying the Cold War era around ‘75-‘91 is excluded from ‘combat’ designation, however I was part of Beirut, Lebanon and it is a forgotten conflict within that timeframe. When will this be recognized?

- Response: Commissioner Hendon stated if he received a Combat Action Ribbon or other military designation, he will qualify for the exemption.

End of public comments.

**Meeting adjourned.**

Next meeting: 6 pm August 10, 2022

Submitted by: Mercedes Elias, Secretary