



**Testimony of James Hendon
Commissioner for the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)**

**Senate Standing Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security & Military Affairs
Assembly Standing Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Assembly Subcommittee on Women Veterans
Online Video Public Hearing
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairs Brooks, Barrett, members of the various committees, and advocates. My name is James Hendon and I am proud to serve as the Commissioner for the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). Since DVS last had the honor to testify before the State, much has changed within our agency and city.

First, I would like to extend our appreciation to the Senate and Assembly Committees on Veterans and the Subcommittee on Women Veterans for their advocacy and leadership within the New York State Veterans' community.

Next, I would like to provide some background information about myself. I took over as Commissioner last November. Since then I have reviewed, revised, and refit this agency to lead into its next phase. As a graduate of West Point, a former infantry officer in the U.S. Army, an entrepreneur, and a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves, I have the unique opportunity to utilize my previous experiences to assist New York City Veterans and their families.

With that said, DVS' mission is to connect, mobilize, and empower New York City's Veteran community to foster purpose-driven lives for New York City Service Members – past and present – in addition to their caregivers, survivors, and families. This job has never been more important as we face an unprecedented economic and health crisis.

At the start of the pandemic, DVS proactively sprang into action; bolstering the services and benefits that we already offered and quickly changing to fit the needs of the fast-moving crisis, developing new policies and programs to meet the times. I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discuss some of these innovative initiatives like Mission VetCheck, VA Claims, expansion within our Public-Private Partnerships, and the work that we are doing housing homeless Veterans.

Lastly, I would also like to publicly thank the DVS staff members whose hard work and dedication continues to inspire me each day.

Engagement

DVS has updated the way that we communicate with Veterans online.

Within a week of the “state of emergency” we published our own COVID-19 resource page geared towards the community that we serve. Our [Veteran Guide to COVID-19 webpage](#) is updated on daily basis with the most current information from local, state, and federal agencies.

Further, we developed policies and procedures to ensure that those working from home do so safely, securely, and efficiently. Despite no longer being in the office, our work and services only continue to increase.

Lastly, DVS launched a weekly COVID-19 specific newsletter for veterans on March 27 to provide them with vital information on how they can protect and take care of themselves.

Mission VetCheck

One of the core tenants of our agency is to connect and empower our constituency. Mission VetCheck, an initiative launched on Memorial Day in response to the COVID-19 crisis, is one such tool to achieve this goal. This project is a partnership with ThriveNYC and was piloted with the New York National Guard.

Mission: VetCheck connects Veteran volunteers with NYC Veterans for wellness check-in calls during the pandemic to help reduce social isolation. While performing these wellness calls, we provide Veterans with essential information about DVS and COVID-19 such as where they can get tested, as well as food assistance, and mental health resources. Since the project’s launch, DVS has placed over 12,000 calls with a 22% response rate.

If you, or someone you know are looking to assist or receive a call, please do not hesitate to contact DVS at 212-416-5250 or contact my Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, Vincent Garcia at vgarcia1@veterans.nyc.gov who is more than happy to assist. It all starts with a friendly call.

VA Claims

New York City is home to over 210,000 Veterans with an estimated 6,692 not receiving service-connected disability Veteran Affairs (VA) benefits. Launched one month ago on July 5, DVS is proud to announce that five staff members, or 12.5% of our agency are certified to process VA claims on behalf of NYC Veterans. Conservative estimates show that this will generate up to \$3.3 million dollars annually in tax free benefits to our constituency.

We are currently receiving six new cases per week and expect that number to grow as word about this vital new service spreads, putting more disposable income in New York Veteran’s pockets. We would like to express our gratitude to the New York State Division of Veteran’ Services (NY DVS) for their support, assistance, and training our staff members so that they can provide VA claims.

Public-Private Partnerships

As DVS develops and implements in-house initiatives, we have also leveraged our relations with the private sector to provide additional services and benefits to the Veteran community. Most recently, in May, Empirevets.com launched a job portal to help Veterans fill critical roles during the COVID-19 crisis in industries that are hiring despite the pandemic. DVS has partnered with the GI Go Fund to ensure veteran jobseekers are aware of this portal and will push this tool to nonprofit employment providers on our VetConnectNYC site to help unemployed veterans.

This portal has over 4,000 positions across all types of industries. The top sectors of employer hiring are IT, healthcare, finance/banking, biotech, and insurance. Thanks to a donation from the Gantcher Family Foundation, this tool will be accessible to the public for six months with the aim of assisting our constituency in finding gainful employment through these unprecedented times. We encourage the members of each committee to learn more by visiting [Empirevets.com](https://www.empirevets.com).

Helping to protect Veterans during the pandemic has also been a focus of our agency. Through a generous donation by Boomer Naturals, a healthcare company in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the Joe Piscopo Radio show, DVS was given 43,000 reusable face masks to distribute to our community.

As of early August, DVS has handed out more than 30,000 masks to more than sixty organizations that support NYC Veterans and their families. Through this distribution effort, DVS has forged greater bonds with local Veteran Service Organizations, Veteran Centers, Nursing Homes, Social Service providers, and individual constituents. In addition to these masks, informational letters were distributed with the masks to inform the recipient about our agency and the services that we provide for NYC Veterans.

Lastly, DVS, in partnership with the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, will soon deliver 500 masks to the U.S. Coast Guard post at Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island. While Tropical Storm Isaias delayed these efforts, we look forward to distributing masks there soon.

In connection with our Outreach and Engagement teams, our Public-Private Partnership department were also able to identify and assist Veterans facing food insecurities through this pandemic. Through a partnership with the Bob Woodruff Foundation, DVS worked with Italians Feed America, an organization founded by Celebrity Chef Fabrizio Facchini, to deliver 400 pounds of sandwich meat to five Veteran food pantries in May and hundreds of boxes of cooking ingredients in July.

Further, in connection with the NYS DVS, and the Campaign Against Hunger, DVS is working to provide meals to Veterans across the five boroughs. Collectively, we are distributing 350-400 Hello Fresh food kits to Veteran households per week through September.

As we continue to develop internal programs and initiatives, DVS looks forward to collaborating with outside organizations to provide more services and benefits to our constituents.

Housing

Our Housing and Support Services team has risen to the challenge during the pandemic moving our Veterans into safe housing even during a national crisis of unprecedented proportion. Since DVS launched its Housing and Support Services, we have housed 922 homeless Veterans. In

June we moved 5 Veterans into their own apartments and in July we moved 8 Veterans into new homes.

Additionally, we finished a wellness check on all formerly homeless veterans that the agency has housed since in 2015 to help support these veterans, especially the seniors among them, who are suffering from feelings of social isolation. In July, we reached out to a list of 529 previously homeless Veterans to inform them about the NY State HCR Rent Relief Program and other resources for rental arrears.

We are encouraging New York Veterans who might be facing an eviction after the statewide moratorium lifts on August 20 to reach out to us for assistance.

They can contact us at 212-416-5250, via email at connect@veterans.nyc.gov, 212-416-5250, online at www.nyc.gov/vets, or on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) @nycveterans.

Conclusion

As we navigate these unprecedented times, we look forward to the continued partnership advocating for Veterans and their families in New York City. We thank you again for this opportunity to update you on the number of initiatives, programs, and success DVS has created since the start of the pandemic.
