

Testimony of Iris Rodriguez, Deputy Commissioner, NYC Department of Homeless Services

**Before the New York City Council, Committees on General Welfare and Veterans,
Oversight Hearing on: Update on the City's Efforts to End Veterans' Homelessness**

April 4, 2022

Good afternoon, I want to thank the Committees on General Welfare and Veterans and Chairs Ayala and Holden for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Iris Rodriguez and I am the Deputy Commissioner for Adult Services at the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS). I am joined by Sonya Russell, DHS Assistant Commissioner for Adult Families, Veterans and Special Services, and Jason Loughran, Assistant Commissioner of Community Affairs at the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS).

We look forward to updating the Committees today on the work that the Adams Administration, DHS and our partners are doing to support veterans who may be experiencing homelessness. New York City's veterans are individuals who made the brave choice of protecting our nation above all else, and for that we owe them our greatest gratitude. There are 225,000 veterans living in our city, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that they are stably housed and connected to the resources they need to thrive. DHS continues to do its part in supporting our veterans, and we are proud of the progress that we, and our colleagues in and outside of government, are making in reducing veterans' homelessness.

Supporting Homeless Veterans

From the outset, the Adams Administration and DSS-DHS have made alleviating veterans' homelessness a top priority, with the goal of better serving and supporting those who've served our nation, and who may be experiencing challenges reentering civilian life. Thanks to aggressive rehousing efforts in close coordination with the NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS), we have reduced the number of veterans experiencing homelessness in New York City by nearly 70% since 2014, from 1,650 veterans to 542 in 2021 — and we won't rest until every New Yorker who has served our country in the military has an affordable home to live in.

Looking at the population of veterans experiencing homelessness in New York City as of this month, 398 are in DHS facilities and 5 are experiencing street homelessness. We are pleased to share that from 2014 through 2021, we have placed 4,913 veterans into housing, which includes 1,130 veterans who have exited shelter through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program, which provides comprehensive case management services to vulnerable veterans as well as rental assistance. This progress can be attributed to the work of our dedicated staff, as well as our partnerships with DVS, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and service providers.

DHS operates a short-term veteran residence called the Borden Avenue Veterans' Residence. The Borden Avenue residence is located in Long Island City, Queens, and it provides transitional housing to 104 veterans in the Grant Per Diem program and 71 veterans in DHS program shelter beds. The Institute for Community Living (ICL) serves as the provider and began as a VA Grant Per Diem Program, which helps fund transitional housing for veterans for up to 24 months. To address veterans' needs, Borden has a nurse practitioner and clinical staff on site to address clients' medical and mental health needs. To further support veterans, there is an Article 28 clinic next to the Borden center, where medical and dental services are provided to veterans and community members.

Preventing Veteran Homelessness

As with our overall service approach, prevention is a key piece of our strategy in addressing veteran homelessness. As valuable as temporary emergency shelter can be for families and individuals with no other housing options, a shelter should not be considered a home. Building on this approach, DHS places prevention efforts at the forefront of agency goals, with the aim of keeping vulnerable New Yorkers in stable housing environments through multiple neighborhood-based services, several of which have been tailored to meet the needs of veterans.

To carry out this vision focused on preventive services, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) established the Homebase program, which is a community-based prevention program and serves as the first point of entry for those at risk of becoming homeless. Homebase assists individuals and families in overcoming immediate housing instability that could result in homelessness, while also helping clients develop plans for longer-term stability. Our Homebase staff across the five boroughs are available to evaluate the specific needs of clients, and offer several services to help New Yorkers secure housing stability, including: services for eviction prevention; assistance accessing public benefits; emergency rental assistance; job placement and education assistance; relocation assistance; and short term financial assistance.

Specifically, to help veterans, DHS has supported programs at the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizen's Council-Homebase, which targets and supports veterans in the community who have experienced homelessness and are at risk of displacement. Through this program, our staff creates profiles for veterans who are at risk of re-entering shelter, so we can monitor their needs before the circumstances become dire. This prevention model helps us ensure veterans have the resources and support they need to remain stably housed in their neighborhoods.

Additionally, to further our preventive services approach, we are implementing our Rapid Rehousing program to support veterans who are either newly entering the shelter system or reentering it. This program model has slight variations from our standard preventive measures, as it focuses on veterans entering shelter and provides enhanced services. This program provides veterans with support for finding housing, rental assistance, moving costs and case management.

The goal here is to ensure that any veteran entering shelter can be successfully placed into permanent housing as quickly as possible.

We also want to highlight efforts to prevent homelessness carried out by our sister agency, HRA, through the Homeless Prevention Administration (HPA). HPA works with DHS, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and several City agencies and organizations to prevent homelessness and help New Yorkers remain stably housed in their neighborhoods. Another important homelessness prevention resource for veterans, and for all New Yorkers across the five boroughs, is the Department of Social Services' (DSS) Office of Civil Justice (OCJ). Through OCJ, tenants at risk of eviction can access free legal representation and advice on issues related to housing eviction, harassment, disrepair and other housing related issues. As mentioned, these services are free and, importantly, available regardless of immigration status.

Pivoting to street outreach, DHS is committed to supporting unsheltered veterans and we are proud of the progress we are making on this front. Due to the efforts of our staff and network of providers, we have reduced veteran street homelessness to 5 individuals. While these numbers are encouraging, our work to reduce the unsheltered veteran population continues each day. We continue to partner with the VA on our street outreach and leverage their coordinated medical services to help individuals on the street. As we have previously reported to the Council, relationship building is the linchpin of our street outreach efforts, and we are proud of our outreach staff who engage our veterans with patience, care and compassion as we work to stabilize them and bring them indoors.

Housing Permanency for Veterans

Securing and maintaining housing permanency for our city's veterans is a top priority for the Adams Administration. We are committed to finding permanent housing for the veterans who are currently in our system and ensuring they have the tools and support to exit our system and remain stably housed moving forward. In 2021, we helped place 341 veterans into a subsidized or unsubsidized placement, and our work continues.

There are several programs available to help veterans experiencing homelessness, or at risk of experiencing homelessness, to secure permanent housing. I would like to briefly walk the committee through these programs, starting with the HUD-VASH program mentioned earlier.

Under the HUD-VASH program, eligible low-income veterans receive a Section 8 voucher as well as case management and supportive services from the VA and community-based outreach clinics, with the goal being to place veterans in long term housing. Veterans are connected to the HUD-VASH program by having service providers refer clients to DHS's VSU, which in turn refers veterans to a VA medical center, where individuals are assessed for eligibility. Once deemed eligible, the housing vouchers are administered by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and NYC Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) to help veterans access public, subsidized and private market housing. This program partnership has proven successful and continues to help veterans experiencing homelessness in our city locate stable, permanent housing.

We also recognize that in order to increase our veteran placements in housing, we must also partner closely with property owners across the five boroughs to find suitable homes for our clients. To encourage landlords to rent their apartments to veterans in need, the City launched the Mission Home Program, which recruits property owners to rent their units to veterans. With the appropriate military discharge status, veterans are able to access HUD-VASH vouchers as well as Support Services for Veteran Families (SSVF), which provides supportive services designed to promote housing stability (including access to benefits, cash assistance, housing court advocacy, job training and employment) to low-income veteran families or individuals either residing in shelter or transitioning to permanent housing.

We also want to highlight the opportunities available to veterans through other rental assistance programs. For instance, veterans are exempt from the 90-day shelter stay requirement to qualify for the City FHEPS rental assistance voucher, and veterans are also prioritized for Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHV), a program made available through the American Rescue Plan Act to assist individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of experiencing homelessness in finding stable housing.

Closing

As we close, we want to emphasize several key takeaways from our testimony:

- The Adams Administration is committed to using every tool at our disposal and is leaving no stone unturned to house veterans experiencing homelessness – that is the least we can do to express our gratitude for their service and commitment to our nation;
- It takes a village to support our veterans experiencing homelessness, from the federal level all the way to the local providers in our neighborhoods, and we must all share the responsibility to properly shelter and house our unhoused neighbors.

We remain committed to serving veterans experiencing homelessness with the care and compassion they deserve and partnering with the City Council on these efforts. Thank you and we welcome any questions that you may have.