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BUREAU OF AUDIT

May 22, 2020

**By Electronic Mail**

James Hendon  
Commissioner  
New York City Department of Veterans' Services  
1 Centre Street, Room 2208  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Final Letter Report on the New York City Department of Veterans' Services'  
Compliance with Local Law 215 of 2018 Regarding the Creation of Veterans  
Resource Centers (Audit #SZ20-092AL)**

Dear Commissioner Hendon:

This Final Letter Report concerns the New York City Comptroller's audit of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services' (DVS') compliance with Local Law 215 of 2018, which governs the development of veterans resource centers. The objective of this audit was to determine whether DVS has complied with the requirements of Local Law 215. Our audit of DVS is one in a series of audits we are conducting on whether DVS is complying with various local laws requiring it to provide access to services, resources, and benefits for veterans.

**Background**

New York City, with a population of more than 8.5 million people, is home to approximately 210,808 veterans; 189,808 are active duty veterans and 21,000 are reserves or National Guard veterans. To help veterans, service members, and their families identify and connect to necessary services, DVS was established as a City agency in April 2016.<sup>1</sup> As an agency of the City, DVS works with other City, New York State (State), and federal agencies, as well as regional private and not-for-profit partners, to improve the lives of all City veterans and their families. Among other things, DVS seeks to ensure that homeless veterans have permanent housing and access to the support services they need to find and maintain their homes. In addition, DVS seeks to expand education and career opportunities for veterans and to provide information to them and their families about the availability of Citywide benefits, resources, and care. DVS states that it is committed to supporting veterans' overall mental health and to specifically helping veterans cope with the full impact of war and their military

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to April 2016, New York City's veterans were served by the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA).

service. DVS serves service members, veterans, or family members regardless of their era of service, branch of service, or discharge status.

Veterans rely on resources at the City, State, and federal levels to obtain information on and gain access to benefits. Accordingly, in 2018, New York City Council passed Local Law 215, amending the City's Administrative Code in relation to the creation of veterans resource centers. Local Law 215 requires that DVS establish and operate at least one veterans resource center in each borough to provide veterans with up-to-date information regarding housing, social services, financial assistance, discharge upgrade resources, and federal, state, and local benefits available to veterans.<sup>2</sup> Each borough must have a minimum of 20 hours of combined field and in-office services per week, including at least 10 consistent office hours. Each location is to be in close proximity to public transportation and easily accessible to persons with disabilities. Additionally, each center's hours of operation should be clearly displayed on the premises and information pertaining to the resource centers should be available on DVS' website. Furthermore, it requires that DVS submit a report pertaining to the operation of the resource centers beginning January 1, 2020 and every six months thereafter to the Mayor and the New York City Council.

The objective of this audit was to determine whether DVS has complied with the requirements of Local Law 215.

## Findings and Recommendations

Our audit found that DVS generally complies with Local Law 215, with one exception discussed below. As the law requires, DVS established and operates a resource center for veterans in each borough.<sup>3</sup> Each resource center is in close proximity to public transportation and accessible to persons with disabilities. The resource centers are normally open at least twice per week from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on select days (in-person services at the resource centers are suspended at present because of the COVID-19 emergency).<sup>4</sup> DVS' Engagement & Community Services Coordinators at each resource center are equipped with copies of DVS' *Veterans Resource Guide* and provide veterans with free counseling and up-to-date information regarding housing, social services, financial assistance, discharge upgrade resources, and federal, state, and local benefits available to veterans. DVS engages

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<sup>2</sup> Discharge upgrade refers to a change in a veteran's "character of discharge" from active military service. Generally, "to receive [U.S.] VA benefits and services, the Veteran's character of discharge or service must be under other than dishonorable conditions (e.g., honorable, under honorable conditions, general)." Each military service maintains a discharge review board with authority to change, correct, or modify discharges or dismissals not issued by a sentence of a general court-martial. *Applying for Benefits and Your Character of Discharge*, [https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/character\\_of\\_discharge.asp](https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/character_of_discharge.asp) (accessed May 5, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> DVS' resource centers are also known as satellite offices. Satellite offices enable veterans and their families to meet one-on-one with VA-credentialed outreach specialists in each of the five boroughs. Walk-ins are welcome, but appointments are encouraged.

<sup>4</sup> At present, in-person community engagement services at Veterans Resource Centers across the five boroughs are suspended, and other services are available online and by telephone only because of the COVID-19 emergency. *City Agency Service Updates*, <https://www1.nyc.gov/nyc-resources/city-agency-service-updates.page> (accessed May 6, 2020).

in several community outreach and education efforts to inform veterans about the resource centers and the services provided at the resource centers.

Additionally, DVS' website provides information about the veterans resource centers including the address, contact information, hours of operation, and services provided. Moreover, DVS submitted its first bi-annual report regarding the operation of the resource centers to the Mayor and City Council on December 15, 2019.

DVS provides services to veterans and veteran family members at its five resource centers, which are located in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island. The Manhattan resource center, currently located in DVS' main office at 1 Centre Street, Room 2208, had been operating on Monday and Thursday.<sup>5</sup> The Brooklyn resource center is located within the NYC Department of Small Business Services' Workforce 1 Career Center at 9 Bond Street, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, on Monday and Wednesday, where veterans can also find assistance with jobs, training, and small business services. The resource centers in the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island are located within their respective Offices of the Borough Presidents (Borough Halls): the Bronx resource center operates at 851 Grand Concourse, Room 209, on Wednesday and Thursday; the resource center in Queens is located at 120-55 Queens Boulevard, Room 222, on Monday and Thursday; and Staten Island's resource center is located at 10 Richmond Terrace, Room G-15, on Tuesday and Wednesday. (As noted previously, in-person services at these resource centers are suspended at present because of the COVID-19 emergency.)

However, we found that DVS' hours of operations were not clearly displayed at DVS' Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens and Manhattan resource centers. The resource center in the Bronx displays the general office hours of the Bronx Borough President's Office, which are Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Brooklyn resource center displays the general hours of the Workforce 1 Career Center, which are Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Staten Island resource center displays general office hours of the Staten Island Borough President's Office, which are Monday to Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:20 p.m. The Queens and Manhattan resource centers display general office hours, which are Monday to Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The hours that are displayed at each of the resource centers are the buildings' hours of operation, not when the DVS resource center is available to veterans.

Each resource center is staffed with one of DVS' Engagement & Community Services Coordinators who is equipped with physical copies of the *Veterans Resource Guide* and is knowledgeable about the benefits, programs, and resources to which veterans are entitled. The Coordinators are also able to talk with and assist veterans or veteran family members and connect them with employment services, educational benefits, financial services, and business

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<sup>5</sup> During the course of the audit, DVS operated a satellite office at the Manhattan Borough Hall located on the main floor of 431 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street, on Monday and Thursday. However, that location was subsequently closed and the Manhattan Engagement & Community Services Coordinator currently is assigned to work at DVS' main office, also located in Manhattan, during the satellite office hours each Monday and Thursday. DVS' main office is generally open Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. As noted previously, in-person services are suspended at present because of the COVID-19 emergency.

opportunities. As part of their outreach and education efforts, Coordinators also attend community events to connect with veterans and inform them of DVS' resource center locations, programs, and capacity to connect them to the necessary resources and benefits. DVS also has a podcast named SITREP designed to inform and inspire by telling the stories of New York City veterans, military families, and community supporters.<sup>6</sup> The podcast features guests exchanging information and conversing with DVS staff, constituents, and community partners about their trials and triumphs and their motivations for service. The podcast encourages veterans to engage with the resource centers to obtain up-to-date information. Additionally, DVS' newsletters contain information about its programs, initiatives, events, and news affecting NYC veterans and their families. DVS also utilizes its social media accounts to communicate with veterans.

Furthermore, DVS' website provides information on the resource centers including the address, contact information, hours of operation, and services provided at each center. The website also provides direct links that are pertinent to veteran benefits and resources including its *Veterans Resource Guide* and Resource Map, VetConnectNYC, programs, press releases, newsletters, multimedia, and community events. DVS' interactive Resource Map displays resources for NYC's military and their families provided by City agencies and veteran services organizations that partner with DVS. Each site on the map depicts the name, service type, hours, address, building details, city, zip code, walk-in acceptability, phone number, email address, website, and service details of the location. In addition, VetConnectNYC further serves to reduce the complexity of navigating resources and benefits by operating as a hub through which veterans can connect to over 80 vetted service providers and a coordination team dedicated to connecting them to the necessary services. Organizations in the network span the range of life needs, in areas including legal services, housing, mental health assistance, education, and employment.

Our findings are outlined in the following two tables, the first entitled Compliance Summary and the second entitled Core Criteria.

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<sup>6</sup> "SITREP" is a common military acronym meaning "situation report." It is a clear and concise status update which provides both context and understanding of current circumstances.

COMPLIANCE SUMMARY		
Criteria	Compliance	Notes
DVS must establish and operate at least one veterans resource center in each borough that is accessible to persons with disabilities and in close proximity to public transportation.	Yes	DVS has a resource center in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island. All locations are accessible to persons with disabilities and in close proximity to public transportation.
Notice of a center's hours of operation shall be clearly displayed on the premises and on the department's website.	No	Each resource center's hours of operation are clearly displayed on DVS' website. However, DVS' hours are not adequately displayed on site at the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island resource centers. The hours that are displayed are the buildings' hours of operation, not the hours when DVS' resource centers are open for service.
DVS' resource centers must provide benefits counseling and a hardcopy of the <i>Veterans Resource Guide</i> .	Yes	Each location is staffed with a DVS Engagement & Community Services Coordinator who is equipped with the <i>Veterans Resource Guide</i> and is knowledgeable about the services and benefits to which veterans are entitled. The Coordinators are also able to talk with and assist veterans or veteran family members and connect them with employment and financial services, as well as business opportunities.
DVS must conduct outreach and engagement efforts to inform veterans about the resource centers.	Yes	DVS encourages veterans to visit its websites to learn about ongoing programs and upcoming initiatives and events at all of its resource centers. DVS also recommends that veterans sign up for its monthly newsletter, follow its social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and listen to its SITREP NYC podcast.
DVS' website must contain information on its resource centers including address, contact information, hours of operation and services provided.	Yes	DVS' website has a page labelled "DVS in your borough" which lists the address, contact information, hours of operation, and services provided.

DVS must submit the first bi-annual report regarding operation of the resource centers to the Mayor and New York City Council by January 1, 2020.	Yes	DVS submitted its initial report to the Mayor's Office and City Council on December 15, 2019. The report contains the required information pertaining to the operation of the resource center including the number of veterans served at each center, the services offered, and descriptions of the most frequently requested information.
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CORE CRITERIA	
Detailed Criteria	Compliance
<p>DVS must have at least one veterans resource center established and operational in each borough by June 1, 2019.</p> <p>Each borough must have a minimum of 20 hours of combined field and in-office service per week, including at least 10 consistent office hours, and must be located in a geographic area that is easily accessible, including for persons with disabilities, and in close proximity to public transportation.</p> <p>Notice of a center's hours of operation must be clearly displayed on the premises and on DVS' website.</p>	<p>DVS had at least one operational veterans resource center in each borough by June 1, 2019.</p> <p>Each borough's veterans resource center has a minimum of 20 hours of combined field and in-office service per week available to veterans and their families as required. The hours of operation for the veterans resource centers are 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on select days, which, at twice a week for 5 hours per day, fulfill the requirement for 10 consistent office hours. The remaining required 10 hours are attained through DVS' outreach and community efforts in each borough.</p> <p>Each veterans resource center is in close proximity to public transportation and accessible to persons with disabilities.</p> <p>DVS' website clearly displays each resource center's hours of operations. However, when visiting the resource centers, we found that the hours displayed at the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island resource centers did not adequately reflect the hours of operation to the public.</p>

<p>Each veterans resource center must provide veterans with up-to-date information, at no cost, regarding, at minimum, (i) matters within the department's purview pursuant to this title, chapter 75 of the charter and state executive law section 358; (ii) housing; (iii) social services offered by public agencies and charitable and private organizations, including but not limited to the provision of specific contact information for such agencies and organizations; (iv) financial assistance and tax exemptions available to veterans; (v) discharge upgrade resources; and (vi) federal, state, and local benefits available to veterans.</p>	<p>DVS' Engagement &amp; Community Services Coordinators staffed at the resource centers are knowledgeable about the services and benefits to which veterans are entitled. Coordinators educate veterans on the tax exemptions available through the NYC Department of Finance. Coordinators are also equipped with DVS' <i>Veterans Resource Guide</i>, which contains information on housing and support services, and DVS' Veterans Success Network and VetsThriveNYC programs. Additionally, the Coordinators and the <i>Veterans Resource Guide</i> advise clients on signing up for services, VetConnectNYC, education benefits, employment benefits, health benefits, housing benefits, and legal resources available to veterans. Furthermore, the resource centers connect veterans to the City Bar Justice Center's Veteran Assistance Project for legal services including discharge upgrades.</p>
<p>Each veterans resource center must provide benefits counseling services and a hard copy resource guide.</p>	<p>DVS' Engagement &amp; Community Services Coordinators provide one-on-one counseling services regarding veteran benefits and are equipped with a copy of the <i>Veterans Resource Guide</i>.</p>
<p>DVS' website must have information about each of the veterans resource centers, including its address, contact information, hours of operation and services provided.</p>	<p>DVS' website includes information about each of its veterans resource centers including address, contact information, hours of operation, and services provided.</p>
<p>DVS in consultation with any agencies identified by the mayor must establish and engage in outreach and education efforts to inform veterans about the veterans resource centers, including their locations, contact information, hours of operation and services they provide.</p>	<p>DVS hosts many outreach and community events. Furthermore, DVS communicates to its target audience via social media, its website, podcast, monthly newsletter, media, flyers, event announcements, and other posted activities. Additionally, DVS' website provides a listing of community events for veterans, service members, and their families, submitted and hosted by various organizations across the New York City area.</p>

Beginning January 1, 2020, and every six months thereafter, DVS must submit a report to the mayor and the speaker of the council regarding the operation of the veterans resource centers. The report shall include the number of veterans utilizing the center; a summary of the services offered; description of services and information most frequently requested by veterans at the center; the number of full-time/part-time staff persons at the center; and the number of complaints received by the center regarding services at the center including feedback received by 311.	DVS submitted its initial report to the Mayor's Office and City Council on December 15, 2019. The report contains the required information pertaining to the operation of DVS' resource centers including the number of veterans served at each center, the services offered, and descriptions of the most frequently requested information, complaints, and feedback from 311.
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We recommend that DVS continue to maintain its compliance with Local Law 215 to ensure it effectively meets the needs of veterans who seek access to veteran services, resources, and benefits at resource centers, outreach events, or online.

We also recommend that DVS veterans resource centers clearly display the correct office hours on premises.

### Scope and Methodology

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. This audit was conducted in accordance with the audit responsibilities of the City Comptroller as set forth in Chapter 5, §93, of the New York City Charter.

The scope period for this audit was April 30, 2019 through April 10, 2020. Our methodology for this audit consisted of the following steps:

- We reviewed applicable laws, rules, policies, and procedures, including Section 31-06 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, to determine our criteria in accordance with Local Law 215.
- We reviewed DVS' *Veterans Resource Guide* dated April 2019 and website to determine whether there was a resource center in each borough and the locations of the veterans resource centers.

- We reviewed the initial DVS *Veterans Resource Guide* that was issued in January 2019 and all updates of the *Veterans Resource Guide* issued during our audit period (issued April 2019, July 2019, January 2020, February 2020, March 2020, and April 2020) to determine whether it contained the information required by Local Law 215.
- We visited DVS' resource centers to determine whether a hardcopy of the *Veterans Resource Guide* was available and whether information about relevant referral services was provided.
- We visited DVS' resource centers to determine whether they were operational during the minimum time required and whether each center provided benefits counseling to veterans and accurate information regarding housing, social services, financial assistance, discharge upgrade resources, and federal, state, and local benefits available to veterans and if the hours were clearly posted.
- We interviewed key personnel at DVS' resource centers to determine whether DVS engages in outreach and education efforts to provide information to veterans about the veterans resource centers including the locations, contact information, hours of operation, and services provided.
- We utilized public transportation to visit the resource centers to determine whether they were in close proximity to bus and subway service and accessible to disabled persons.
- We analyzed DVS' website to determine whether it provided information regarding the resource centers including their addresses, contact information, hours of operation, and services provided.
- We reviewed the initial bi-annual report sent to the Mayor and Speaker of the Council regarding the operation of the veterans resource centers to determine whether it was submitted by January 1, 2020 and contained the required information required by Local Law 215.
- We reviewed DVS' newsletters and podcasts to determine whether DVS further provides adequate access to information, services, resources, and benefits to veterans.

The matters covered in this letter report were discussed with DVS officials during and at the conclusion of the audit, and they agreed that an exit conference was not necessary. On May 8, 2020, we submitted a draft letter report to DVS officials with a request for comments. We received a written response from DVS on May 21, 2020. In their response, DVS officials agreed with the audit's findings and recommendation, stating, "DVS will

Commissioner Hendon

May 22, 2020

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continue to maintain compliance with Local Law 215 so that we can continue to effectively ensure that we meet the needs of Veterans who seek access to veteran services, resources, and benefits at our resource centers. Further, DVS will ensure that our Veterans' Resource Centers clearly display the correct office hours on premises." The full text of DVS' response is included as an addendum to this report.

Sincerely,



Marjorie Landa

c:

Dina Simon, Chief of Staff, Acting Deputy Commissioner, DVS

Terrence Holiday, Assistant Commissioner, Engagement and Community Services, DVS

Glenda Garcia, General Counsel, DVS

Quamid Francis, Deputy Chief of Staff, DVS

Jeff Thamkittikasem, Director, Mayor's Office of Operations

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COMMISSIONER

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ADVISOR

May 21, 2020

Ms. Marjorie Landa  
Deputy Comptroller for Audit  
Office of the Comptroller, Bureau of Audit  
1 Centre Street, Room 1100  
New York, NY 10007

**SUBJECT:** Draft Letter Report on the New York City Department of Veterans' Services  
Compliance with Local Law 215 of 2018 Regarding the Creation of Veterans' Resource Centers  
(Audit #SZ20-092AL)

Deputy Comptroller Landa,

This letter is to confirm receipt of the Final Draft Letter Audit Report that the Comptroller's Office shared with the Department of Veterans' Services on May 8, 2020, on the audit done to ensure DVS' compliance with Local Law 215, regarding the Creation of Veterans' Resource Centers (Audit #SZ20-092AL).

DVS thanks the Office of the Comptroller for its findings that DVS generally complies with Local Law 215 and is upholding its responsibilities to New York City Veterans.

DVS will continue to maintain compliance with Local Law 215 so that we can continue to effectively ensure that we meet the needs of Veterans who seek access to veteran services, resources, and benefits at our resource centers. Further, DVS will ensure that our Veterans' Resource Centers clearly display the correct office hours on premises.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JWH", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Commissioner James Hendon

Connect with us!



@NYCVeterans  
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