

City of New York

OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER

Scott M. Stringer
COMPTROLLER



AUDITS & SPECIAL REPORTS

Marjorie Landa

Deputy Comptroller for Audit

Audit Report on the Compliance of the
New York City Department of Veterans'
Services with Local Law 214 Regarding
Benefits Counseling Services for
Veterans

SZ20-110A

April 14, 2021

<http://comptroller.nyc.gov>



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

April 14, 2021

To the Residents of the City of New York:

My office has audited the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) to determine whether pursuant to Local Law 214, it has provided counseling services regarding benefits to veterans regarding City, State, and federal veterans' benefits. We audit City agencies such as DVS to help ensure that they are complying with applicable laws and regulations and that they are providing residents with access to important City services.

The audit found that DVS generally complied with Local Law 214. Specifically, our audit found that DVS provides counseling services in person, by phone, and by email to veterans seeking assistance regarding City, State, and federal benefits to which they, their spouses or domestic partners, dependents, and family members may be entitled because of their military service. DVS' Engagement and Community Services staff provide benefits counseling services in each of the five boroughs, including at each veterans resource center, and that Engagement and Community Service Coordinators receive training with a focus on military and cultural competencies, engagement best practices, and various mental health related topics, including DVS' Mental Health First Aid Training Program and the City's Mental Health First Aid Training Program. Furthermore, the audit found that DVS offers several programs to ensure that veterans are connected to benefits, including VetConnectNYC and VetsThriveNYC. VetConnectNYC, which is staffed by DVS, is a program that 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. VetsThriveNYC is a program that provides an integrative approach to health and healing for veterans and their families.

Although COVID-19 caused DVS to temporarily close its veterans resource centers in March 2020, DVS actively reaches out to veterans through email and phone and is committed to knowing where veterans are during COVID-19 through active wellness checks. In coordination with this effort, DVS makes calls to check up on formerly homeless veterans and connect them to eligible services.

The report recommends that DVS should continue to maintain its compliance with Local Law 214 to ensure it effectively meets the needs of veterans who seek information, evaluation, or advice regarding services, resources, and benefits at the City, State, and federal levels at DVS' veterans resource centers, outreach events, or online.

The results of the audit have been discussed with DVS officials, and their comments have been considered in preparing this report. Their complete written response is attached to this report. If you have any questions concerning this report, please e-mail my Audit Bureau at audit@comptroller.nyc.gov.

Sincerely,

Scott M. Stringer

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER AUDITS & SPECIAL REPORTS

Audit Report on the Compliance of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services with Local Law 214 Regarding Benefits Counseling Services for Veterans

SZ20-110A

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, the New York City Council enacted Local Law 214, which requires the New York City Department of Veterans' Services to provide benefits counseling services to veterans seeking benefits offered by the City of New York, the State of New York, and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, to which they, their spouses, domestic partners, dependents, and family members may be entitled because of their military service. Pursuant to Local Law 214, counseling services must include advice, evaluation, and information, and must be provided by trained staff in each of the five boroughs, including at each veterans resource center.

This audit focuses on whether the New York City (City) Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) complied with Local Law 214. DVS, created in April 2016, works with 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. 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 benefits, resources, and care Citywide. DVS states that it is committed to supporting veterans' mental health overall and to addressing the full impact of war and their military service. DVS serves service members, veterans, and family members regardless of era of service, branch of service, or discharge status.

Audit Findings and Conclusions

We found that DVS generally complied with Local Law 214. Specifically, our audit found that DVS provides counseling services in person, by phone, and by email to veterans seeking assistance regarding City, State, and federal benefits to which they, their spouses or domestic partners, dependents, and family members may be entitled because of their military service.

Our audit also found that DVS' Engagement and Community Services staff provide benefits counseling services in each of the five boroughs, including at each veterans resource center, and that Engagement and Community Service Coordinators receive training with a focus on military and cultural competencies, engagement best practices, and various mental health related topics, including DVS' Mental Health First Aid Training Program and the City's Mental Health First Aid Training Program. DVS' Mental Health First Aid Training Program was designed to specifically address the mental challenges faced by veterans and service members and is staffed by DVS Peer Coordinators. The City's Mental Health First Aid Training provides guidance to help staff recognize the early signs and symptoms of mental illness and substance abuse in the form of a free eight-hour training course available online and in person. After completing the training, participants receive a three-year certification in Mental Health First Aid. In addition, in 2020, the New York State Division of Veterans' Services trained and accredited five members of DVS' Community Services team to process claims and assist veterans and their families who need claim advisement.

Furthermore, we found that DVS offers several programs to ensure that veterans are connected to benefits, including VetConnectNYC and VetsThriveNYC. VetConnectNYC, which is staffed by DVS, is a program that reduces 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. VetsThriveNYC is a program that provides an integrative approach to health and healing for veterans and their families. Additionally, DVS maintains a Veterans Resource Guide which provides updated information on DVS' services as well as contact information for DVS and its veterans resource centers. DVS also utilizes its website, social media accounts, podcast, and newsletters to connect with veterans and veteran family members to ensure they are connected to benefits. During our audit scope, DVS updated its website to include a Government Benefits List which provides a comprehensive list of federal, City, and State benefits offered to veterans.

Although COVID-19 caused DVS to temporarily close its veterans resource centers in March 2020, we found that DVS continued to offer its services online, by email, and by phone. DVS actively reaches out to veterans through email and phone and is committed to staying in touch with veterans during COVID-19 through active wellness checks. In coordination with this effort, DVS makes calls to check up on formerly homeless veterans and connect them to eligible services. Furthermore, DVS updated the frequency of its newsletter distribution from monthly to weekly beginning March 24, 2020, to ensure veterans receive continuous information and connections to benefit resources during COVID-19.

DVS serves as a hub that puts veterans at the center of all of its efforts and coordinates services with a range of agencies at the City, State, and federal levels, as well as through public-private partnerships. Our audit concluded that DVS is in compliance with Local Law 214. Appendices I and II contain details of the specific items we tested and the results of our tests. Appendix III illustrates DVS' efforts to ensure Local Law 214 compliance.

AUDIT REPORT

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.¹ To help veterans, service members, and their families identify and connect to necessary services, DVS was established as a City agency in April 2016. As an agency of the City, DVS works with other City, 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. DVS strives to assist every veteran, regardless of era of service, branch of service, or discharge status and to foster purpose-driven lives for City service members and their families through targeted advocacy at the City, State, and federal levels, community engagement in each borough, and service to ease access to benefits.

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 City-wide 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 service.

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 214, amending the City's Administrative Code, requiring DVS to provide counseling services to veterans seeking assistance regarding City, State, and federal benefits to which they, their spouses or domestic partners, dependents, or any family members may be entitled because of their military service.

Specifically, Local Law 214 requires DVS' counseling services to include advice, evaluation, and information.² Furthermore, DVS' benefits counseling services must be provided by trained staff and be available, at a minimum, in each of the five boroughs, including at each veterans resource center.

Objective

To determine whether the New York City Department of Veterans' Services is in compliance with Local Law 214 of 2018. Local Law 214 of 2018 requires that DVS provide benefits counseling services to veterans regarding City, State, and federal veterans' benefits. The counseling services must include advice, evaluation, and information and be provided by a trained staff within each of the five boroughs and veterans resource centers.

¹ NYC DVS-New York City Veterans Demographics: Sourced from VETPOP, 2014, and American Community Survey, 2016.

² Counseling services must not include the services identified by Section 14.629(b) of Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This provision refers to assisting claimants in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims for VA benefits by accredited agents or attorneys.

Scope and Methodology Statement

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.

To achieve our audit objective, we reviewed DVS' benefits counseling services, Annual Services and Performance Reports for Fiscal Years 2019 and 2020, its website, and other pertinent documents. We also interviewed key DVS personnel and conducted site visits at DVS' veterans resource centers between September 10, 2019 and January 30, 2020. In addition, we observed DVS' virtual City Council Hearing on October 19, 2020, which concerned the oversight of services to veterans during COVID-19.

Our scope period was from July 1, 2018 through February 12, 2021. Please refer to the detailed scope and methodology at the end of this report for the specific procedures and tests that were conducted.

Discussion of Audit Results

The matters covered in this report were discussed with DVS officials during and at the conclusion of this audit. DVS officials were notified of our findings during the audit and agreed that a preliminary draft report and exit conference were not necessary. On March 31, 2021, we submitted a draft report to DVS with a request for comments. We received a written response from DVS on April 5, 2021. In their response, DVS officials agreed with the audit's findings and recommendation, stating, "DVS thanks the Office of the Comptroller for its findings that DVS generally complies with Local Law 214 and is upholding its responsibilities to New York City Veterans. DVS will continue to maintain compliance with Local Law 214 so that we can continue to effectively inform our constituents of the various benefits and services across the city, state, and federal levels."

The full text of DVS' response is included as an addendum to this report.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

We found that DVS generally complied with Local Law 214, both before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and after. Our review of DVS' benefits counseling services, Veterans Resource Guides, website, and Annual Services and Performance Reports for Fiscal Years 2019 and 2020 found that DVS has made continuous efforts to provide benefits counseling services that include advice, evaluation, and information, and to ensure veterans and veteran family members are connected to all eligible City, State, and federal benefits.

Specifically, our audit found that DVS provides benefits counseling services in person, by phone, and by email that encompass a variety of topics including employment, health, income support, education, housing, and entrepreneurship.³ DVS' benefits counseling services include information and advisement on a range of City, State, and federal benefits, such as the Forever GI Bill,⁴ which enhances or expands education benefits for veterans, service members, families, and survivors, the Veteran Crisis Line, which provides free, confidential support for veterans in crisis and their families and friends, and the City's 311 system, which DVS utilizes to help connect veterans to trauma counseling and crisis intervention support. Of the benefits included in DVS' counseling services during our audit, 37 percent were a combination of all three or of just two (City and State benefits or City and federal benefits), and 29 percent involved benefits that are offered exclusively by the City.

DVS informs veterans of the criteria and documentation required for benefits and assists them with the benefit application process. The documents most frequently requested by a veteran or family member to obtain benefits involve proof of the veteran's military service.⁵ DVS provides advice about alternative ways for veterans to prove their military service by giving guidance on how to request forms online, in person, by mail, or by fax.

Additionally, DVS informs veterans that they are a protected class under New York City's Human Rights Law which makes it illegal for employers, landlords, and providers of public accommodations to discriminate against veterans and active military service members due to their military status, and that veterans can file complaints with the New York City Commission on Human Rights if they believe they have been discriminated against.

We also found that DVS provides an additional form of counseling known as "direct service" or "case management." This form of counseling encompasses all three types of mandated counseling (advice, evaluation, and information) through an engagement curve, but also includes an additional focus on examining a person's specific need(s). For veterans, these needs typically include housing navigation and disability claims.

³ DVS' most requested benefit types involve employment, income support, legal, housing, and shelter issues.

⁴ The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans (commonly referred to as G.I.s). The original G.I. Bill expired in 1956, but the term "G.I. Bill" is still used to refer to programs created to assist U.S. military veterans.

⁵ DVS does not have the authority to determine eligibility, aside from the verification that a New York City resident is a veteran of the U.S. military. Acceptable documents include the DD Form 214, DD Form 215, DD Form 256, NGB Form 22, NGB Form 22-a, VA ID Card, NYC ID Card with Veteran Designator, military record, military health record, or VA letter. DD-Forms are documents from the U.S. Department of Defense pertaining to discharge from military duty. The NGB Form 22 is the National Guard Report of Separation and Record of Service. These documents provide all of the pertinent information about an individual's military career, including the nature of discharge.

DVS provides benefits counseling services to veterans and veteran family members at its five resource centers which are located in the City's five boroughs. Each location is staffed with an Engagement and Community Services Coordinator knowledgeable about the City, State, and federal benefits, programs, and resources to which veterans are entitled. We found that the coordinators were able to appropriately assist with connecting veterans to the necessary services by providing advice, evaluation, or information regarding specific benefit and eligibility requirements. During visits, veterans and veteran family members are also provided with a copy of DVS' Veterans Resource Guide which informs veterans of the educational, employment, health, housing, and legal benefits that are available to veterans and veteran family members on City, State, and federal levels, and includes contact information for DVS and the locations and hours of operation of DVS' veterans resource centers. The guide is updated as often as necessary to maintain its accuracy. Moreover, the Engagement and Community Service Coordinators also provide the veteran or veteran family member with an intake form to document the visit, information provided, and the services needed or requested. This intake form allows the veteran and DVS to keep track of what services were requested. DVS' Engagement and Community Service Coordinators also conduct outreach across the City by attending events and meetings throughout the five boroughs where they conduct presentations, provide information and referrals to veterans, and network with veteran service organizations, community-based providers, and government partners.

Our audit also found that DVS' staff receive periodic training from internal and external experts on benefits counseling services. Specifically, its Engagement and Community Service Coordinators receive annual training on military and cultural competencies, engagement best practices, and various mental health related topics, in addition to the City's Mental Health First Aid training. DVS helped to create a veteran/military service member-specific version of the Mental Health First Aid training, designed to address the unique mental health challenges veterans and service members may experience. Moreover, in 2020, the New York State Division of Veterans' Services trained and accredited five members of DVS' Community Services team to process claims and assist veterans and their families that need claim advisement. These accredited DVS staff members have begun helping veterans and their families process Veterans Affairs (VA) claims.⁶ In connection with this activity, DVS developed a dedicated email address for its claims services that allows clients to schedule an appointment directly.

Furthermore, DVS offers several programs in accordance with its efforts to ensure veterans have access to benefits including VetConnectNYC and VetsThriveNYC. VetConnectNYC, launched in 2018, 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. DVS' VetsThriveNYC program is an integrative approach to health and healing that is utilized by DVS staff in their work with veterans and their families. It is based on the City's Mental Health First Aid training, but with input from DVS, customized to address the needs of veterans. DVS' Engagement and Community Services staff continually provide mental health and other wellness-related referrals to veterans seeking assistance.

Additionally, our audit found that DVS utilizes its website, social media accounts, newsletters, and podcast to connect with and provide information to veterans to ensure that they are connected to

⁶ Previously, the New York State Division of Veterans' Services and other Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) had been responsible for assisting veterans with their VA claims in New York City.

benefits. DVS' podcast SITREP⁷ was designed to inform and inspire by telling the stories of City veterans, military families, and community supporters. 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. Furthermore, we found that DVS' newsletters contain information about its programs, initiatives, and events, as well as news affecting City veterans and their families.

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. Furthermore, during the course of the audit, DVS updated its website to include a Government Benefits List which provides a comprehensive list of federal, City, and State benefits offered to veterans. The list indicates the type of benefit (whether federal, State, or City, or a combination thereof); the type of service provided (whether advisement, evaluation, or information); eligibility requirements; and a general description of, and a direct link to the relevant webpage for further information on the benefit.

Although COVID-19 caused DVS to temporarily close its veterans resource centers and suspend in-person services, we found that DVS adjusted its services to occur online, by email, or by phone. This included providing critical support to at-risk veterans, such as housing, employment, veteran benefits, and general guidance on where to locate support resources. Furthermore, through our observation of DVS' virtual City Council Hearing held on October 19, 2020, we found that amid the COVID-19 pandemic, DVS partnered with ThriveNYC to launch Mission: VetCheck, an initiative that allows volunteers from the veteran community to make supportive check-in calls to other City veterans. Through VetCheck, volunteers provide their peers with vital information on essential public services, COVID-19 resources and testing locations, and online mental health support. DVS actively reaches out to veterans through email and phone and is committed to knowing where veterans are during COVID-19 through active wellness checks. In coordination with this effort, DVS makes calls to all formerly homeless veterans to check-up on them and connect them to eligible services. DVS also partnered with GetFoodNYC to deliver food to veterans and, as of October 2020, had provided 10,000 meals to veterans during the pandemic. Also, through its partnership with EmpireVets, DVS had distributed 33,000 face masks to veterans, including at shelters and hospitals, as of October 2020.

Moreover, to ensure continuous access to updates and information regarding benefits during COVID-19, DVS added a COVID-19 Resource page to its website that provides direct connections and information to several topics including, but not limited to, food assistance, emergency financial assistance, unemployment assistance, housing, education services, military families and caregivers, healthcare, mental health support, transportation, veterans with disabilities, legal services, discrimination, harassment, hate crimes, veterans events, relevant government agencies, and employment support. Additionally, DVS updated its Veterans Resource Guide specifically for COVID-19 to notify the public that the resource centers are temporarily closed and to provide information about DVS services that are being provided in the

⁷ SITREP is a common military acronym meaning "situation report."

interim. It also updated the frequency of its newsletter distribution from monthly to weekly in March 2020, thereby significantly increasing its email outreach from slightly under 10,000 recipients in March 2020 to over 80,000 in April 2020. The newsletter for December 30, 2020 includes a year-end review and summary of DVS' services during COVID-19.

According to the DVS website, since its inception in 2016, DVS has achieved several milestones, including taking a leadership role in reducing veteran homelessness, making New York City the largest city in the country to become certified for ending chronic veteran homelessness. Its Housing and Support Services team has housed over 900 homeless veterans and created an aftercare unit to help ensure that the veterans remain housed and avoid a return to housing insecurity. Another milestone occurred in 2019, when DVS launched Service2Service, a program that pairs veterans with mentors who work for the City so that veteran mentees can learn about attaining employment and succeeding professionally within the City government. Additionally, the DVS Final Honors program ensures that eligible unclaimed and homeless veterans are given dignified burials at a national cemetery. Through this program, DVS coordinates an average of 85 burials per year. In addition, DVS and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) partnered to launch HUD-VASH Continuum, the first in the nation program to provide rental subsidies together with case management services in an effort to house disconnected veterans.⁸ The HUD-VASH Continuum program, launched in 2017, creates paths to permanent housing for disconnected veterans and their families. Once provided a VASH Continuum voucher and given support from DVS' Veteran Peer Coordinators, these veterans are able to find permanent, affordable housing.

Overall, we found that DVS provided counseling services to veterans seeking assistance regarding City, State, and federal benefits to which they, their spouses or domestic partners, dependents, or any family members may be entitled because of their military service. We found that counseling services were offered in all five boroughs at DVS' veterans resource centers as well as online, by phone, and by email, and that DVS appropriately adjusted its services during COVID-19 to be offered online via email or over the phone. Our audit concluded that DVS is in compliance with Local Law 214. Appendices I and II contain details of the specific items we tested and the results of our tests. Appendix III illustrates DVS' efforts to ensure Local Law 214 compliance.

Recommendation

1. DVS should continue to maintain its compliance with Local Law 214 to ensure it effectively meets the needs of veterans who seek information, evaluation, or advice regarding services, resources, and benefits at the City, State, and federal levels at DVS' veterans resource centers, outreach events, or online.

DVS' Response: "DVS will continue to maintain compliance with Local Law 214 so that we can continue to effectively inform our constituents of the various benefits and services across the city, state, and federal levels."

⁸ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/veterans/about/about.page>; <https://medium.com/@nycveterans/best-of-2018-expanding-access-and-serving-the-underserved-9332c9d63>; Blog Posts - DVS ([nyc.gov](https://www1.nyc.gov/site/veterans/about/about.page))

DETAILED 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.

We have created a format that lists the specific tests conducted as it relates to the methodology. Please see Appendices I and II for details.

We reviewed DVS' benefits counseling services, Annual Services and Performance Reports issued in 2019 and 2020, and other pertinent documents, and we interviewed key DVS personnel.

To achieve our objectives, we performed the following:

- Reviewed Local Law 214, and Title 38 Section 15.629(b) of the Code of Federal Regulations;
- Reviewed Local Law 216 of 2018, which governs the development of a veterans resource guide;
- Reviewed Local Law 215 of 2018, which governs the development of veterans resource centers;
- Reviewed Local Law 44 of 2019, which requires DVS to produce an annual report regarding the department's services and performance;
- Created compliance checklists to assess DVS' compliance with Local Law 214;⁹
- Conducted interviews with DVS' designated Engagement and Community Service Coordinators and other staff members;
- Reviewed DVS' Annual Services and Performance Report for Fiscal Year 2019 and DVS' Annual Services and Performance Report for Fiscal Year 2020;
- Tested whether DVS provided veterans benefits counseling at each veterans' resource center through unannounced visits at each resource center;¹⁰
- Obtained and reviewed documentation to determine whether DVS' benefits counseling services included City, State, and federal benefits;
- Obtained and reviewed documentation to determine whether DVS' benefits counseling services included advisement, evaluation, and information;
- Assessed DVS' programs used to provide access to benefits including VetConnectNYC and VetsThriveNYC, including funding for each program;
- Reviewed the Comptroller's Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2019 regarding funding for DVS;

⁹ See Appendix I for the completed checklist created in connection with this audit.

¹⁰ See Appendix II for further descriptions of the tests we conducted.

- Reviewed the Comptroller's Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2020 regarding funding for DVS;
- Reviewed the Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC Programmatic Budget as of the FY22 Preliminary Budget, January 2021;
- Obtained and reviewed the employee manual for benefits training and/or written policies and procedures to determine whether benefits counseling services are provided by trained staff;
- Interviewed DVS' designated Engagement and Community Service Coordinators to determine if they received copies of DVS' manuals and written policies and procedures;
- Observed DVS' manuals and written policies and procedures on desk areas;
- Reviewed documentation of classes that were offered and taken by DVS' staff receiving periodic training from internal and external experts (federal and State) on benefits counseling services;
- Reviewed the documentation from NYS Division of Veterans' Services to determine the designated benefit counselors;
- Downloaded DVS' assistance service requests from New York City Open Data;
- Reviewed DVS' Veterans Resource Guide and all updates of the Veterans Resource Guide issued during our audit period;
- Reviewed DVS' newsletters, podcasts, and website to determine whether DVS further provides adequate access to information, services, resources, and benefits to veterans;
- Assessed whether DVS continued to provide benefits counseling services during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- Observed DVS' virtual City Council Hearing meeting held on October 19, 2020 regarding oversight of benefits services during COVID-19.

DVS BENEFITS COUNSELING SERVICES COMPLIANCE CHECKLIST

Question	Auditors' Assessment	Auditors' Comments
1. Does DVS provide benefits counseling for veterans?	Yes	DVS provides benefits counseling services to veterans and veteran family members regardless of service era and discharge status.
2. Does DVS' benefits counseling services include benefits offered by New York City, New York State and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs?	Yes	DVS' benefits counseling services incorporates veterans benefits offered on a City, State and federal level. Of the benefits included in DVS' counseling services during our audit, 37 percent were a combination of all three or a combination of City and State or City and federal benefits, and 29 percent involved benefits that are offered exclusively by the City.
3. Does DVS' benefits counseling services include advice, evaluation and information?	Yes	DVS' benefits counseling services includes advice, evaluation, and information. Advice usually comes in the form of a service referral. DVS also provides information regarding its services through its website, newsletter, social media accounts, and public events.
4. Is DVS' benefits counseling provided by trained staff?	Yes	DVS staff receive ongoing training from both internal and external experts. The Engagement and Community Service Coordinators have received training with a focus on military and cultural competencies, engagement best practices, and various mental health related topics, including the City's Mental Health First Aid training.
5. Are DVS' benefits counseling services available in each of the five boroughs, including at each of DVS' veterans resource centers?	Yes	DVS' benefits counseling services are provided by DVS' Engagement and Community Services Coordinators throughout the five boroughs including at each veterans resource center. DVS' Engagement and Community Service Coordinators also attend events and meetings throughout the five boroughs where they conduct presentations, provide information and referrals to veterans, and network with veteran service organizations, community-based providers, and government partners.

DVS BENEFITS COUNSELING TESTS CONDUCTED

Test	Criteria for Evaluation	Auditors' Assessment
1. Anonymous visits to DVS' Veterans Resource Centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was a staff person able to respond to our questions regarding benefits counseling provided to veterans on a City, State, and federal level? 	DVS' Engagement and Community Service Coordinators at the resource centers were knowledgeable regarding veteran benefits on federal, State, and local levels, and able to provide information, evaluation or advice. They were equipped with a copy of DVS' Veterans Resource Guide which provides information on DVS' programs, focus areas, initiatives, and contact information. Visits to DVS' resource centers are documented in an Intake Form to document the visit, information regarding the veteran, and the services needed or requested.
2. Review of DVS' Benefits Counseling Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the services incorporate advice, evaluation, and information regarding veteran benefits on a City, State and federal level? 	DVS' benefits counseling services includes advice, evaluation, or information to veterans and veteran family members regarding City, State, and federal benefits. Additionally, DVS has a service called case management which encompasses all three types of the mandated counseling through an engagement curve, and also includes an additional focus on examining the person's specific need(s). These counseling services encompass a variety of topics including employment, health, income support, education, housing, and entrepreneurship.

APPENDIX II

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<p>3. Assessment of DVS' Benefits Counseling Services during COVID-19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did DVS adjust its services to continuously provide benefits counseling services during COVID-19? 	<p>In response to COVID-19, DVS adjusted its services to occur online and over the phone. DVS contacts veterans via email or phone as a checkup and to inform veterans of eligible benefits. Moreover, DVS launched Mission: VetCheck, an initiative that allows volunteers from the veteran community to make supportive check-in calls to other City veterans. Volunteers provide their peers with vital information on essential public services, COVID-19 resources and testing locations, and online mental health support. Moreover, to consistently ensure veterans are provided with the latest information, DVS updated the frequency of its newsletter distribution from monthly to weekly beginning March 24, 2020.</p>
<p>4. Assessment of additional measures utilized by DVS to ensure veterans and veteran family members are connected to benefits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does DVS utilize any additional services to provide veterans or veteran family members with advice, information, or evaluation? 	<p>In coordination with its efforts to ensure veterans are connected to available benefits, DVS maintains a Veterans Resource Guide which is updated as often as necessary to maintain accuracy and posted on its website. DVS also provides information or connections to services through its website, social media accounts, podcast, and newsletter. Furthermore, DVS utilizes VetConnectNYC to reduce the complexity of navigating resources and benefits and VetsThriveNYC to provide mental health services.</p>
<p>5. Assessment of DVS' services during COVID-19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did DVS continue to connect veterans to critical issues including food and housing support during COVID-19? 	<p>Despite COVID-19's impact, DVS continued its efforts to ensure vulnerable veterans are connected to food and housing support. DVS partnered with GetFoodNYC to send food directly to homebound veterans in need. Through this partnership, as of October 2020, DVS has provided 10,000 meals to veterans during the pandemic. DVS also works with HelloFresh, the New York State Division of Veterans' Services, and local veteran organizations to provide free meals to veterans. Additionally, DVS helps connect veterans to food resources including emergency food assistance, food banks, delivery services and benefits assistance by email or by phone. Furthermore,</p>

		<p>connections to these services are available on DVS' website, which also provides a request form to receive delivery of meals.</p> <p>Additionally, DVS continued its efforts to actively house homeless veterans through its Veteran Peer Coordinators during COVID-19. DVS has shifted to video or telephone for interviews and outreach. It also assists veterans with homeless prevention and information on aftercare support. As of October 2020, DVS has issued 40 HUD-VASH vouchers and has housed 184 veterans in FY 2020.</p>
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LOCAL LAW 214 COMPLIANCE – OBSERVATION

EXAMPLE #1 - INTAKE FORM FOR BENEFITS COUNSELING SERVICE REQUESTS AND ASSISTANCE

NYC Veterans

Intake Staff: _____ Date of Intake*: _____ Time of Intake*: _____
Intake Location*: _____

How did you learn about us? *
☐ Word of mouth ☐ Online search (i.e. Google) ☐ DVS Website ☐ Social Media ☐ Another NYC Agency: _____

Have you worked with a representative from our agency before? ☐ Yes ☐ No

DVS INTAKE FORM

I. REQUESTOR INFORMATION (IF APPLICABLE)

First Name*: _____ Middle: _____ Last*: _____ Preferred method of contact*:
☐ Phone ☐ Email

E-mail: _____ Phone Number: _____ Apartment/Suite: _____

Street Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ ZIP*: _____

Relationship to Client*: ☐ Partner/Spouse ☐ Caregiver ☐ Other Family ☐ Supporter

II. CLIENT INFORMATION

First Name*: _____ Middle: _____ Last*: _____

Street Address: _____ Apartment/Suite: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP*: _____

Date of Birth: _____ Place of Birth: _____

Gender: ☐ Male or Man ☐ Female or Woman
☐ Non-binary (not female/woman or male/man)
☐ Other ☐ Unknown/Choose to not disclose

Marital Status: ☐ Married ☐ Separated ☐ Widowed ☐ Divorced
☐ Single or Never Married

Race: ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native ☐ Asian ☐ Black or African-American
☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander ☐ White ☐ Two or more races

Ethnicity: ☐ Hispanic or Latino

III. ASSISTANCE INFORMATION

What is the main reason for your visit, how can we assist? check all that apply

☐ Burial ☐ Education or GI Bill ☐ Employment ☐ Health/Wellness (non-VA)
☐ Housing ☐ IDNYC w/Veteran Designator ☐ Legal ☐ Discharge Papers or Upgrades
☐ Homelessness ☐ Homelessness Prevention ☐ VA Benefits ☐ City Benefits / MTA Fair Fares

IV. MILITARY INFORMATION

Affiliation: Service member ☐ Active ☐ Reserves ☐ National Guard

Branch of Service: ☐ Army ☐ Marine Corps ☐ Navy ☐ Air Force ☐ Coast Guard
☐ Veteran ☐ Spouse / Partner ☐ Dependent

Dates of Service: _____ to _____ Rank/Rate: _____

Character of Discharge: ☐ Honorable ☐ General ☐ Other than Honorable ☐ Bad Conduct
☐ Uncharacterized Separation ☐ Dishonorable

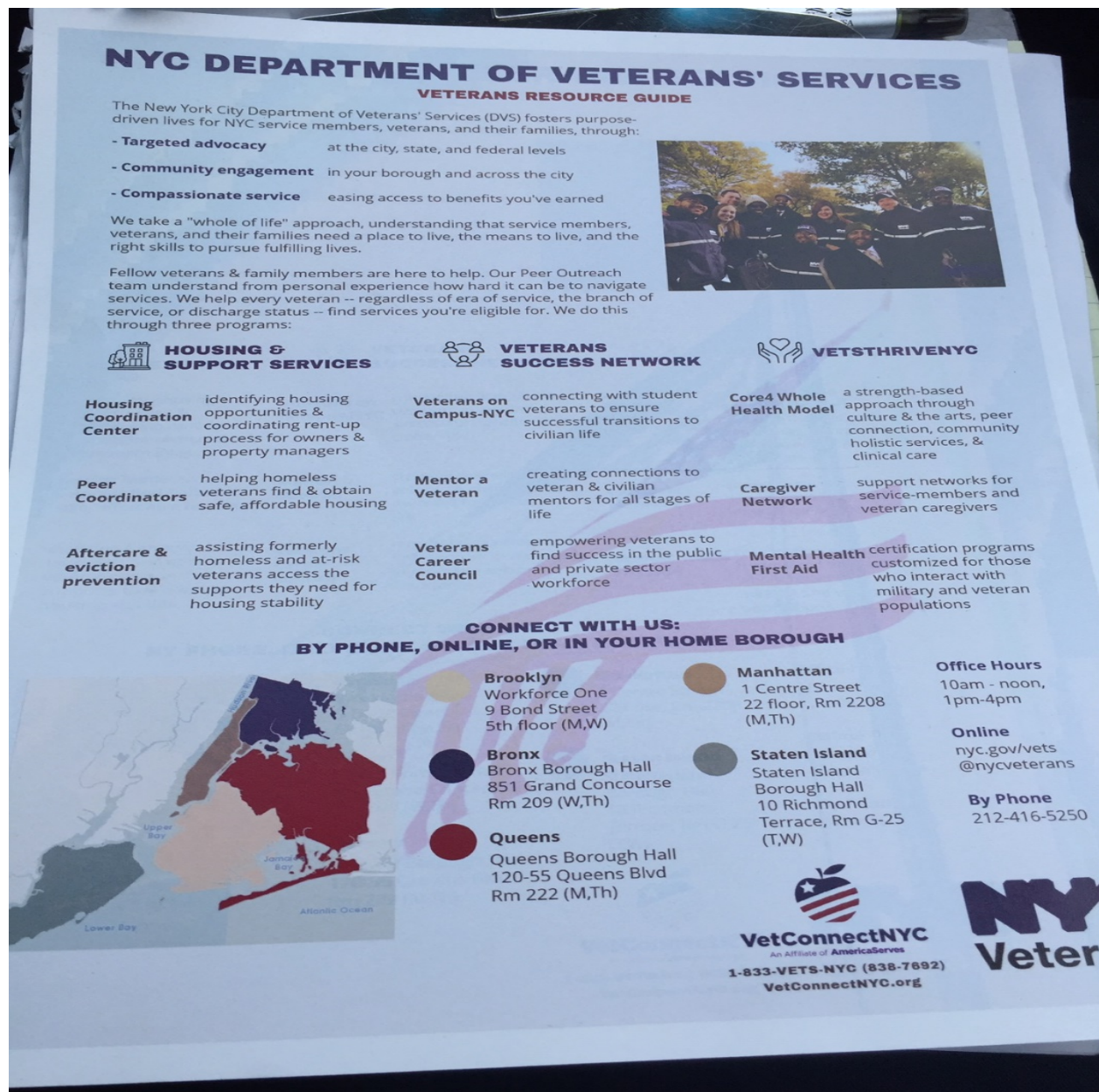
Did the veteran serve in a combat zone? ☐ Yes ☐ No If Yes, when & where? _____

Is the veteran deceased? ☐ Yes ☐ No Date of death? ____ / ____ / ____

DVS INTAKE FORM WHICH IS PROVIDED TO VETERANS WHO VISIT A VETERANS RESOURCE CENTER TO ASSESS WHAT BENEFITS SERVICES ARE NEEDED.

LOCAL LAW 214 COMPLIANCE – OBSERVATION

EXAMPLE #2 - VETERANS RESOURCE GUIDE PRIOR TO COVID-19



PRIOR VERSION OF DVS' VETERANS RESOURCE GUIDE WHICH SUMMARIZES DVS' PROGRAMS, SERVICES, AND CONTACT INFORMATION.

LOCAL LAW 214 COMPLIANCE – OBSERVATION

EXAMPLE #3 - COVID-19 VETERANS RESOURCE GUIDE

NYC DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' SERVICES
VETERANS RESOURCE GUIDE

COVID-19 Programs and Services

DVS has launched several new programs to support veterans and their families during the COVID-19 crisis. Please note that our borough offices are currently closed due to the pandemic. If you would like to learn more about the following services contact DVS at connect@veterans.nyc.gov or 212-416-5250.

Community Wellness

Mission: VetCheck

DVS partnered with the Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC to launch Mission: VetCheck, a new program designed to connect Veterans during this period of social isolation. Through this program, volunteers from the Veteran community are making check-in calls to fellow Veterans across the City. These calls provide Veterans with information on public services, COVID-19 testing locations, and mental health support. Contact DVS at VetCheck@veterans.nyc.gov to learn how you can volunteer or request a check-in call for your members if you are a Veterans Organization.

Food Insecurity

GetFoodNYC

With millions of New Yorkers struggling to access food, DVS staff is coordinating meal deliveries for Veterans in need. We are working with GetFoodNYC to deliver food to Veterans unable to afford groceries and homebound Veterans including seniors, disabled Veterans, and those with an increased vulnerability to COVID-19. Contact DVS if you or a Veteran you know needs help getting food.

Housing

Safely Housing Veterans During the Pandemic

The DVS Housing and Support Services team is currently working remotely to protect vulnerable Veterans. We are in constant contact with clients, landlords, shelter staff, and agency partners to identify available apartments, offer virtual tours, and - when safe - provide in-person viewings. We also process all paperwork needed to help Veterans move from the shelter into their new home. Please contact DVS if you need housing assistance or if you are worried that you may be evicted once New York's rent moratorium ends on August 20th.

Employment & Career Support

EmpireVets

Launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, EmpireVets is a new job board website that includes thousands of local postings and a military skills translator to help Veterans connect with professional opportunities that best serve their experience and talents. The website features openings in critical COVID-19 roles. Visit empirevets.com to learn more.

Keeping Veterans Informed

COVID-19 Webpage

The DVS COVID-19 webpage features VA service updates, answers to frequently asked questions, and messages from the DVS Commissioner. We have also amassed a list of resources to keep NYC Veterans informed about available financial assistance, business support, mental health offerings, and more. Find our COVID-19 page at nyc.gov/vets.

Weekly Newsletter



DVS delivers a weekly newsletter to keep NYC Veterans informed on the latest news regarding COVID-19's impact on the community. The newsletter features City service updates, information on DVS programs, Veteran-specific resources, and a rundown of virtual veteran events. To sign up for our newsletter email connect@veterans.nyc.gov or use your phone to scan this QR code:

Contact DVS

Website: nyc.gov/veterans

Phone Number: 212-416-5250

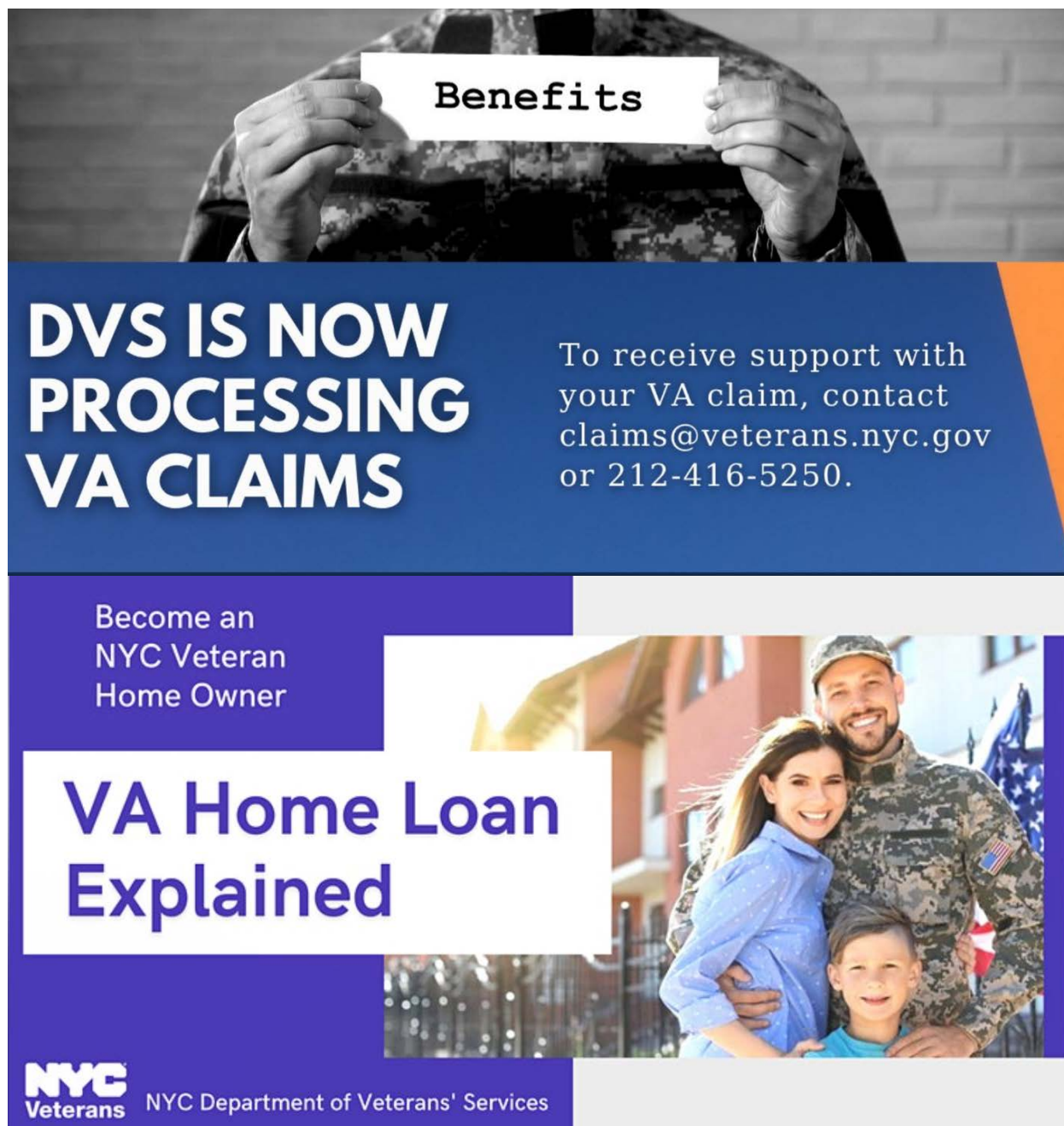
Email: connect@veterans.nyc.gov



DVS' CURRENT VETERANS RESOURCE GUIDE WHICH WAS UPDATED DURING COVID-19 TO PROVIDE INFORMATION REGARDING ITS RESPONSE, PROGRAMS, AND SERVICES DURING COVID-19.

LOCAL LAW 214 COMPLIANCE – OBSERVATION

EXAMPLE #4 - ILLUSTRATIONS OF DVS' BENEFITS COUNSELING SERVICES



Benefits

DVS IS NOW PROCESSING VA CLAIMS

To receive support with your VA claim, contact claims@veterans.nyc.gov or 212-416-5250.

Become an NYC Veteran Home Owner

VA Home Loan Explained

NYC Veterans NYC Department of Veterans' Services

DVS ASSISTING VETERANS WITH RECEIVING STATE AND FEDERAL BENEFITS THAT ARE INCLUDED IN DVS' BENEFITS COUNSELING SERVICES.

LOCAL LAW 214 COMPLIANCE – OBSERVATION

EXAMPLE #5 - NEWSLETTER PROVIDING INFORMATION ON BENEFITS, PROGRAMS, AND SERVICES FOR VETERANS



NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) Weekly Newsletter

NYC Department of Veterans' Services: A Year-End Review



Making supportive calls. Distributing face masks. Preparing meal kits. Housing the homeless. Processing VA benefit claims. Watch to learn how NYC supported veterans throughout 2020.

At the start of the pandemic, the [NYC Department of Veterans' Services \(DVS\)](#) developed a proactive plan to continue providing the highest quality of care to the City's veteran community. Read about the services and initiatives DVS developed in response to the challenges of 2020:

DVS' NEWSLETTER WHICH COMMUNICATES TO VETERANS PERTINENT UPDATES AND INFORMATION REGARDING VETERAN BENEFITS.



James W. Hendon
COMMISSIONER

Quamid Francis
CHIEF OF STAFF

April 5, 2021

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 214 of 2018 Regarding Benefits Counseling to Veterans (Audit
#SZ20-110A)

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 March 31, 2021, on the audit done to ensure DVS' compliance with Local Law 214, regarding benefits counseling to Veterans (Audit #SZ20-110A).

DVS thanks the Office of the Comptroller for its findings that DVS generally complies with Local Law 214 and is upholding its responsibilities to New York City Veterans.

DVS will continue to maintain compliance with Local Law 214 so that we can continue to effectively inform our constituents of the various benefits and services across the city, state, and federal levels.

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
www.nyc.gov/vets

1 Centre St, 22nd Floor, Ste 2208,
New York, NY 10007
P: 212 416 5250
F: 212 312 0950

C: Scott Stringer, Comptroller, Office of the Comptroller
Glenda Garcia, General Counsel, DVS
Quamid Francis, Chief of Staff, DVS
Jeff Thamkittikasem, Director Mayor's Office of Operations
George Davis III, Deputy Director, Mayor's Office of Operations
Daniel Michaela, Senior Policy Advisor, Office of the Deputy Mayor
Shanny Spraus-Reinhardt, Senior Advisor, Office of the Deputy Mayor