



**BRONX BOROUGH PRESIDENT VANESSA L. GIBSON**

**New York City Council Committee on Veterans**

**Testimony of Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson**

**Friday September 15, 2023**

Thank you Chair Holden, Chair Lee, and the members of the Committee on Veterans and Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addiction for convening this hearing today to discuss mental healthcare and support for veterans.

As Bronx Borough President, I am proud to represent over 20,000 veterans who call our borough home. Those who have served our country in the armed forces have made great sacrifices in order to preserve our safety and freedom. They have often paid the price in wounds – both physical and mental. They deserve and are entitled to all the help that we can give them to aid in their recovery.

Over 6,000 veterans across the country take their own lives every year. In 2020, the adjusted suicide rate for veterans was 57% higher than the rate for non-veterans. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene reports that one in ten veterans have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder. Further, it was found that 30 percent of suicides among veterans involved drug or alcohol use. These statistics are appalling. Our veterans have experienced traumatic events, and this is a tragic example of how we are not doing enough to care for those who served. That is why it is essential that we as a city do more to ensure that every veteran is able to access the mental healthcare that they need.

The stigma around discussing mental health issues is so strong and those in need of help most often do not know where or how to seek help. There is a critical need to restructure mental healthcare delivery to transition from punitive systems to an equitable treatment model with supportive care for all.

I am proud that my office maintains a Veterans Advisory Council as a forum for veterans in The Bronx to organize and connect with government to make real and lasting change in our communities. The Bronx veterans who serve on this council are an active and engaged group that is fully committed to improving outcomes for all veterans in our city, including in health and mental health. We are unified in our goal of building a strong and successful future for veterans in The Bronx.

We must do more to ensure that veterans are getting all the support that they deserve. While this starts with the federal government fully funding and supporting veterans benefits and Veterans Affairs facilities throughout the country, the effort must include state and local partners as well. Collectively, there is more that needs to be done to ensure necessary resources and treatment are accessible for the most vulnerable.

As the home of the James J. Peters Medical Center, The Bronx is an important hub for veterans' healthcare in our city. This facility provides essential health services to our veterans, and I am proud to work with them to improve access and outcomes. We must be vigilant to preserve the other VA facilities across the city. Closing any of these facilities would prove disastrous for veterans in the other boroughs and add a great strain onto the Bronx's VA hospital.

I am proud to have worked with Councilmember Eric Dinowitz to introduce the resolution under consideration today to recognize November as Veteran Appreciation Month in New York City. We have long celebrated, recognized, and honored our veterans in November, with President Clinton first proclaiming November as National Veterans and Military Families Month in 1996. However, New York City has never recognized a full month for veteran appreciation before. This recognition is the right thing to do, and I hope that the committee will join us in supporting this resolution.

The other two bills under consideration today are also important to advance the cause of mental healthcare for all New Yorkers. Creating a mental health coordinator in each city agency will help the employees and staff who keep our city government running. By ensuring that we are complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act and conducting the proper outreach to city employees, we can ensure that everyone gets the help that they need and is available to them.

The health disparities in our vulnerable communities are a call to action for all public health initiatives and a central focus of my administration. The network of health partners and organizations in the Bronx have amplified their efforts to reach deep into the neediest communities to support better access to nutritious foods, access to mental health resources, and regular preventative health screenings.

In addition to veterans, we must also make sure that other vulnerable populations receive adequate mental healthcare, including LGBTQIA+ people, children, and seniors. Long-term mental health and socialization issues have not been fully accounted for or understood.

On July 16, 2022, the 988-suicide prevention hotline was launched nationwide. The hotline provides 24/7 free and confidential emotional support to those in mental health distress.

There is a critical need to restructure mental healthcare delivery to transition from punitive systems to an equitable treatment model with supportive care for all. I look forward to working with my colleagues in government on these systemic fixes that necessitate mandatory continuity of care and coordinated outpatient and community-based services.

Thank you again to the Chairs and committee members for holding this hearing. The veterans in our communities deserve our support and recognition for their sacrifice. I hope that together we are able to make a positive change for them and their families.