NYC Council Passes Bill To Help Veterans

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After what some advocates call years of inaction, the City Council has spent the last few months passing a series of bills aimed at helping veterans.

The flurry of legislative action comes at a time when the resources for veterans across the country are increasingly strained but the need for them is increasing as post-9/11 soldiers come home.

The latest bill to be passed by the Council directs each city agency to name a veterans' affairs liaison who would also work with the mayor's office to make sure former soldiers' needs are being met. Training would also be provided as needed for the liaisons. The bill passed 49-0 yesterday.

Sponsored by Brooklyn Councilman Vincent Gentile, the bill follows up on a 2008 executive order from Mayor Michael Bloomberg the calls for the coordination of veterans services with the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs. Called ineffective by some, the order has fallen flat. The inaction prompted Gentile to propose Int. 0480, which already boasted 27 co-sponsors.

Gentile called the bill a benefit for both the city and veterans.

"It's a win for the city because it's at no cost," Gentile said. "And it's a win for veterans because the liaisons will be better trained."

Gentile added that he expected Bloomberg to sign the bill, and hoped that veterans could begin to see changes in the city's handling of their requests as early as September.

The mayor's office did not respond to immediate requests for comment.

But, earlier this year, Terrance R. Holliday, the commissioner of the Mayor’s Office of Veterans’ Affairs, told the Council committee that the administration was more than willing to adopt the bills and had already begun working to make itself more accessible to veterans.

"The fact is we need the talent and skills that our veterans can apply to key jobs in our city," Holliday said. "As we all know, and the intentions of the Council reinforce, those that served bring critical and diverse talents that can be leveraged to strengthen our city’s economy."

Within the last three months, the Council has voted on four bills on a range of veterans' issues, including loosening restrictions on license requirements and better connecting veterans to job opportunities.

Compared to other towns around the country, New York City's veterans are a small part of the population. Numbers from the most recent Census count show that veterans make up less than 3 percent of the overall population. Still, that's no small number.

There are more than 224,000 former service members in the city, and the Council's veterans committee chair Matthieu Eugene said today that they deserve City Hall's attention.

"We owe them a great deal of gratitude," Eugene said, hinting at bills in the work that deal with affordable housing and immigration. "We don't do esnough for veterans."

In early April, Bloomberg signed off on a legislative package passed unanimously through the Council to improve the city's rate of veteran joblessness.

One of those bills allows New York City veterans to apply their relevant work experiences during their time in service towards any licensing and certification requirements needed to work in the city. Veterans in the process of earning a license and who are called into action can continue

the licensing without interruption.

Part of that package also called on the Mayor's Office for Veterans Affairs to connect veterans with military skills to applicable jobs through a reliable and updated job bank.

Within the next few months, the city will begin to offer employment and career resources through the agency's website.

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