



## 2019 NYC Public Advocate Special Election

# Voter Guide

On Tuesday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019, New York City will elect the next Public Advocate. The office of Public Advocate is one of three citywide elected officials, and is the first in line to succeed the Mayor. It is the role of the Public Advocate to champion the public and ensure government is responsive to its needs. In recent years, the office has included a veterans' liaison and taken on key roles and legislation to improve the lives of NYC veterans and families.

The NYC Veterans Alliance presents this Voter Guide for informational purposes to our community. We contacted candidates eligible to stand in the **Special Election** scheduled for **February 26, 2019**, and solicited their responses on key questions of concern to our membership. This Guide makes no endorsement; candidates are listed in the order in which they responded.

Note: Responding candidates include Jumaane Williams, Rafael Espinal, Michael Blake, Melissa Mark-Viverito, Ydanis Rodriguez, Anthony (Tony) Herbert, Nomiki Konst, Dawn Smalls, Eric A. Ulrich, and Benjamin Yee. The campaigns of Daniel O'Donnell, Ron Kim, David Eisenbach, Jared Rich, and Helal Sheikh were contacted but did not respond. No contact information could be found for the campaign of Manny Alicandro.

## Are you committed to the city's enforcement of Local Law 119-2017 protecting veterans and servicemembers in NYC's Human Rights Law?

Candidate	Answer	Explanation (optional)
Jumaane Williams	Yes	As the [primary sponsor] of Local Law 119 of 2017, I am absolutely committed to ensure that the City, through the Commission on Human Rights – or any other relevant body, investigate, and where appropriate take action to protect veterans and servicemembers against discrimination in housing, employment, licensure and speech. I was proud to stand with General Sutton and the veteran community in announcing the passage of this landmark legislation. There have been documented cases, across New York City, of employers terminating employees due to their deployment orders, and cases of landlords denying rentals of apartments because of stereotypes about PTSD. With this law, anyone who discriminates is subject to penalties of up to \$250,000 for willful violations, and unlimited compensatory damages, including emotional distress.
Rafael Espinal	Yes	There should be no instance of any veteran or family member not having the ability to receive or maintain housing.
Michael Blake	Yes	We must support our veterans and I am very committed to housing for veterans, particularly student veterans. Many of my constituents are student-veterans who are utilizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill to attend institutions like Morris College and Fordham University, and I have received complaints about landlords not accepting their verified housing income from the VA. I believe that the majority of these cases are due to confusion and not malicious intent. As Public Advocate, I will work closely with the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) and the Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) to both educate landlords and seek housing options for student veterans. In addition to housing, we must also ensure that we vigorously enforce the law against discrimination based on military or veteran status. I will not tolerate that, as a person who knows what discrimination feels like and with a brother who is a veteran.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	Yes	Veterans unfairly face barriers to employment and housing. I was proud to have this law pass the City Council under my leadership, and as Public Advocate I will press the Department of Consumer Affairs to enforce the law and investigate reports of discrimination.
Ydanis Rodriguez	Yes	
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	Yes	
Nomiki Konst	Yes	
Dawn Smalls	Yes	NYC's Human Rights Law is one of the best in the nation and it's important that we continue to enforce it on behalf all protected classes including veterans.
Eric A. Ulrich	Yes	I helped pass this law as Chair of the Committee on Veterans.
Benjamin Yee	Yes	

**Will you support measures to improve the city's employment, reemployment, and HR policies for veterans and Reserve and Guard servicemembers who are part of the NYC government workforce?**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Answer</b>	<b>Explanation (optional)</b>
Jumaane Williams	Yes	I call on city agencies to set minimum benchmarks for hiring New York City veterans and servicemembers. It is not enough for our agencies to list, in their employment documents, that they “encourage” veterans and servicemembers to apply. As Public Advocate, I will hold agencies accountable by employment the City Charter-given authority to inspect their books. I want to know that they are spending enough money in recruitment, taking the interview process seriously, and are complying with the law by accommodating a veteran or active-duty servicemember where a need is present. Our military are some of the best trained, organized and competent and these qualities are always needed in large organizations such as city government.
Rafael Espinal	Yes	
Michael Blake	Yes	Right now, the city of New York does not have an accurate count of how many veterans it employs across the five boroughs, while 31.3% of the Federal Government’s workforce is comprised of veterans. As your Public Advocate, a crucial first step I will take is to work closely with DVS and the VAB to get an accurate count of how many veterans the city of New York employs. Once we have an accurate, trackable metric, all three organizations should collaborate on ways in which we can increase veteran hiring across the city and create more employment opportunities for veterans.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	Yes	We should do all we can to make government jobs accessible to our veterans. As Public Advocate, I will push for my Outreach Department to facilitate conversations to find opportunities that support veterans and Reserve and Guard service members who are currently in positions within NYC government and those with an interest in being part of NYC government.
Ydanis Rodriguez	Yes	
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	Yes	
Nomiki Konst	Yes	
Dawn Smalls	Yes	
Eric A. Ulrich	Yes	
Benjamin Yee	Yes	

**Will you commit to robust oversight of the implementation of programs through the NYC Department of Veterans' Services and the discretionary funding earmarked for organizations serving veterans by the NYC Council?**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Answer</b>	<b>Explanation (optional)</b>
Jumaane Williams	Yes	I am pleased that DVS is now a Department-level agency that has increase staff and continues, in its infancy, to increase programming for our Veterans. General Sutton has done a great job helping to stand up the new Department. One of the most critical programming that DVS should focus on is its Ending Homeless Veterans initiative. A significant number of our street homeless are veterans who have been shamefully left behind by our society, after these New Yorkers have sacrificed so much for us. While there has been progress made, we have got to do more. One of my priorities will not only be to ensure that any financial support that groups receive are resulting in targeted, effective services for veterans, but to ensure that we're addressing a veteran as a whole person, who must have access to employment, housing, academic and other resources with which to thrive and prosper.
Rafael Espinal	Yes	
Michael Blake	Yes	As Public Advocate, I will be committed to providing robust oversight over all programs serving veterans across the five boroughs. Working closely with DVS, the City Council, and the VAB, we will develop metrics to track the efficacy of programs and provide recommendations for improvement.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	Yes	As Speaker of the City Council in 2014 I pushed the mayor to double funding for the Mayor's office of Veteran Affairs. In 2015, we were able to increase the budget for veteran services by \$2.9 million. This included \$1 million in funding for the Veterans Services Initiative for homelessness prevention, job placement, legal, and mental health services. As Public Advocate I will continue to fight for veterans and ensure that essential services are fully funded.
Ydanis Rodriguez	Yes	
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	Yes	I will advocate for additional funding. In a city with a \$90 billion budget, spending for veterans' services should be among our top priorities.
Nomiki Konst	Yes	
Dawn Smalls	Yes	
Eric A. Ulrich	Yes	
Benjamin Yee	Yes	

## Will you defend student veterans against predatory for-profit colleges?

Candidate	Answer	Explanation (optional)
Jumaane Williams	Yes	One of the powers of the Public Advocate's office that I look forward to using is the power of the bully pulpit and the power of the courts in defense of our student vets. As Public Advocate, I pledge to pursue legislative and legal actions aimed at making student vets aware of these predatory, for-profit schools and making sure that any student vet who was taken advantage of is made whole again.
Rafael Espinal	Yes	My office already encourages students to participate in the NYS Excelsior program.
Michael Blake	Yes	The Century Foundation issued a report last year after examining 119 for-profit colleges in New York State and the results were disturbing. They showed that nearly half of all students at for-profit colleges in New York defaulted on their federal student loans within 12 years and that a majority of students at 25 of 65 for-profit institutions it researched had earnings below those of the average high-school graduate, earning roughly \$25,000 a year after 10 years. For our young men and women transitioning from service to civilian life, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is a commitment that we made to honor their sacrifice. For predatory for-profit colleges to exploit this program by providing substandard degrees and certifications is completely unacceptable. As Public Advocate, I will advocate for greater oversight of for-profit colleges and transparency information on job placement rates to all service-members prior to enrollment. We must honor the intent of the GI Bill and fight fraud, waste and corruption.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	Yes	
Ydanis Rodriguez	Yes	
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	Yes	
Nomiki Konst	Yes	
Dawn Smalls	Yes	All students should be protected from predatory for-profit colleges that often do not provide an adequate education and leave students without the skills they need to get a job and debt that they can't pay off.
Eric A. Ulrich	Yes	
Benjamin Yee	Yes	

## Will you ensure that PA staff understand the unique needs and challenges facing veterans, servicemembers, and their families?

Candidate	Answer	Explanation (optional)
Jumaane Williams	Yes	I pledge that all of my staff in the Public Advocates office will be trained to understand the unique challenges that face veterans, servicemembers and their families. They will have at their fingertips, resources that will help address their needs, whether it be a reference to affordable housing, healthcare, educational resources or vocational training. I also pledge to ensure that veterans and/or servicemembers are not just advising me as Public Advocate, but part of the staff that helps set the agenda for the office.
Rafael Espinal	Yes	I plan to hire at least one veteran and work closely with veterans' groups.
Michael Blake	Yes	Transitioning from military service to civilian life is a daunting process – a process I witnessed firsthand as my brother Donovan retired from the U.S. Army after 29 years of service. One of the first things I will do as Public Advocate is require my staff to take Mental Health First Aid training offered through DVS (or another accredited program if DVS is unable to provide the training). Every member of my staff will represent the mission of the office of Public Advocate, and that includes understanding the unique challenges and needs facing veterans, servicemembers and their families. I will also prioritize hiring veterans to my staff as I have for the past four years.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	Yes	This is especially important for the office's constituent services staff, who help New Yorkers with any problems they may face receiving services or accessing housing. We will also look to hire veterans into our staff.
Ydanis Rodriguez	Yes	
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	Yes	
Nomiki Konst	Yes	
Dawn Smalls	Yes	
Eric A. Ulrich	Yes	I will hire a veterans' liaison as Deputy Public Advocate.
Benjamin Yee	Yes	It is extremely important that the staff of the Public Advocate's office be able to engage effectively with the diverse and unique residents of New York. This will be achieved through two methods: First, ensuring hiring of team members with experience in and across a range of backgrounds and issues. Second, through regular seminars and staff development which bring experts from constituencies to the Public Advocate's office, and take team members to the communities they are meant to serve.

## What is your relationship to and/or understanding of the veteran community?

Candidate	Answer
Jumaane Williams	Although I am not a veteran myself, I come from a family of servicemembers who have been in service or continue to be in the service, including my cousin, who was injured as his team was searching for bombs. I'm thankful for their service. Having friends and family members helped me to understand that we must use the levers of power, where the existing, in support of those who have traveled to lands near and far to protect us all. This is the exact reason why I authored the Veteran and Servicemember Non-Discrimination Act.
Rafael Espinal	I work well with the veterans' community. I understand to evolving needs of this community and I am committed to working with stakeholders to help resolve many issues.
Michael Blake	For most of my adult life, I've looked up to my eldest brother Donovan who served in the U.S. Army for almost 30 years. As an Assemblymember, I served on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs advocating for policies that would help honor the sacrifice of New York servicemembers just like my brother. I passed the Veterans App Bill in Albany to help Vets learn of access to services, I have also made it a point to hire veterans to my staff to ensure their perspective is integrated into the work we do for the community. As DNC Vice Chair, I work closely with the Veterans and Military Families Council to ensure that Veterans' voices are heard in the electoral process.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	I am proud to be the daughter of veterans. My father served in the Army and my grandfather proudly served in the Navy. My family taught me the value of service and it was one of the things that motivated me into a career in advocacy and civil service. Our military functions with the understanding that all people are equal and that is one of my core beliefs. At this point in time, our veterans have been in active warfare for more than 17 years and they are not receiving the services that they deserve. The fact that we have veterans that are facing homelessness, have to wait months for an appointment for the VA, and are not receiving other important services is a collective failure for our country. We have to do better. As Public Advocate, my office will work directly with veterans' groups to ensure that they receive the services that they need. I will always serve as a voice for Veterans causes.
Ydanis Rodriguez	One of my younger brothers served in the U.S. Navy. I strive to learn more and more about the intersecting issues impacting the lives of veterans, and how we can improve how we serve them and their families.
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	Many of my family members are military veterans. My brother served in the Marines. My grandfather and uncles served in the army during Korean War, Vietnam War and Middle Eastern conflicts. I was unable to serve but am eternally grateful to the men and women who have and still do. I will be a voice for all military service.
Nomiki Konst	I understand the veteran community to be a diverse community of servicemembers and their families who are bound together by a shared experience of public service and a set of unique needs and challenges that can only be addressed by a responsive city government that is attuned to the veteran experience. The veteran community's relationship to our government and public institutions is unlike that of any other group, and our elected officials too often

	fail to recognize this unique relationship. In exchange for the service and sacrifices made by veterans, government makes crucial commitments that veterans and their families are dependent on. Elected officials have a duty to not only oversee but to continually recommit our government's obligations to the health and well-being of veterans.
Dawn Smalls	My father was in the Air Force during Vietnam War as a pilot. After the service, he went on to Trinity College, Harvard Business School graduate. The Vietnam War was a unique time in American History. Many of those who came back felt forgotten and unappreciated by the country that sent them. My husband went to the United States Naval Academy and served as an officer in the Navy before going to law school (where we met) and ultimately pursuing a career in law and then in business. These connections and their friends who have served during peace and war have given me a personal view through their stories into their experiences, sacrifices, and challenges. Most importantly, it has shown me the tremendous obligation that we have as a society to take these men and women back into our communities once their service has ended and take bold steps to reintegrate and support them in their transition to civilian life.
Eric A. Ulrich	I served as the chair of the NYC Council Committee on Veterans in the 2014-2018 term. During my tenure, the council passed several landmark pieces of legislation improving the quality of life for veterans and their families. I was also the prime sponsor of the bill which established the New York City Department of Veteran Services (DVS), formally MOVA. I have a strong legislative track record of supporting causes that are important to former servicemembers. While I am no longer the chair of that committee, I am still a vocal and active supporter of veterans' issues.
Benjamin Yee	Though not a veteran, I have ties to the community through service work. I have many friends who have worked for organizations which provide support for veterans such as NYC Veterans Alliance and IAVA, or organizations which work with veterans to promote peaceful foreign policy such as the Truman National Security Project. As a result, I've volunteered and participated in many programs to support veterans during my time in community organizing.

## Do you see the veterans' community in NYC as a priority constituency, why or why not?

Candidate	Answer
Jumaane Williams	Yes, the veteran community is a priority constituency, as has been my entire career. It is critical that we see those who have served as whole people with sometimes unique challenges. It is unacceptable that there is even one case of a veteran or servicemember coming home and not receiving the respect and honor that they have earned. Recently, I introduced a resolution that would support federal housing programs specifically for veterans that the Trump administration is trying to cut. As Public Advocate, I will continue to lift up the voice of those who have fought to protect us- whether here or abroad.
Rafael Espinal	YES. All constituencies are priority and will be handled as such.
Michael Blake	Yes. I consider the NYC military and veterans community a priority constituency for three reasons: my personal connection through my brother, the civic duty to advocate for those who served on our behalf, and the sizable presence of the military in the city. New York is without a doubt a military town. The city is home to over 220,000 veterans of every generation, serves as the host of Fleet Week every year, and conducts the largest Veterans' Day Parade in the country. It would be impossible for me not to consider the veterans' community a priority constituency.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	Absolutely. It is our duty to respect and honor the service and sacrifice our veterans have made for our country. Veterans and their families have particular needs, from mental health services to non-civilian tax burdens. That is why I pushed for funding for the Veterans Services Initiative. As Public Advocate, I will make it a priority to provide veterans with assistance to these issues and to support them in finding more opportunities to thrive in our city whether it be opening their own small businesses, accessing higher education or finding their next career step.
Ydanis Rodriguez	Veterans are a constituency of the highest priority and are representative of the diversity of our city in gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, ethnicity, race and abilities. Over 200,000 veterans call New York City home, making it the highest veteran population in the state. Veterans bravely continue to serve and contribute to our city when they return home after putting their lives on the line for love of country and our values. They work in government, corporate firms, establish small business, buy homes and raise their families in our city. It is incumbent upon the Public Advocate and other elected officials to ensure veterans count with equitable resources necessary to thrive once they leave active duty in the military such as access to mental health services, job training, housing, opportunities to win government contracts, among other resources.
Anthony (Tony) Herbert	As stated above - Freedom isn't free. I will always speak up for those who risk their lives so that I can speak my mind.
Nomiki Konst	I do see the veterans' community in NYC as a priority constituency. The way we treat our veterans is a strong marker and signal of how moral, just, and responsive our entire political system is. If we are failing our veterans, then that's a sign that we are failing everyone, and that our political system is broken in fundamental ways. Furthermore, given the role that veterans play in their service to the country and the risks and sacrifices that entails, their perspectives are unique and vital to a well-functioning political process, policymaking

	process, and democracy. Their voices need to be continually elevated in public discourse.
Dawn Smalls	Yes, veterans continue to be a large untapped resource to revitalize, energize, and rebuild our communities. Through their actions, they have shown a love of country and their fellow citizens and a deep sense of duty to something larger than themselves. We need to make sure our most vulnerable veterans get the service and special attention they need but we also need to make sure that we find ways for them to continue to serve.
Eric A. Ulrich	Yes! Veterans are among the city's greatest assets.
Benjamin Yee	Veterans are absolutely a priority constituency. That's why I've made sure to include veterans on my campaign and will make sure to include veterans in my office as Public Advocate. Ultimately, our government has a covenant with veterans which is regularly broken. Our service members train for a specific task, to serve our nation, and when they are discharged they are forgotten, not given any help with reintegration and shortchanged on promised services. What we fail to do at the federal level our municipal and State governments must strive to fulfill.

## Is there anything else we should know about you and your candidacy?

Candidate	Answer
Jumaane Williams	I want any servicemember or veteran to know that when I am Public Advocate, you will have a central place to turn to for resources to help support you and your family. You will also have a central place to share suggestions you have for reforming government, enacting new laws or holding city agencies accountable to you.
Rafael Espinal	I have been well-known for voicing the concerns of New York City’s young and ambitious groups, championing efforts to preserve our healthy environment, fostering art and creative spaces in gentrifying neighborhoods, and secure the rights of those who have been disenfranchised by the City, while simultaneously following in the footsteps of Bernie Sanders-esque thinking patterns to provide for the majority, rather than the 1%.
Michael Blake	As Public Advocate, I will take to scale the Vets Entrepreneurs Incubator that James Hendon is leading in NYC. My office will focus on military families in addition to vets, treating veteran trauma, and veteran job placement will be a priority.
Melissa Mark-Viverito	NYC prides itself on being a progressive city, but in order for it to be truly progressive, our leadership and it’s priorities must be reflective of our diversity. I am running for every New Yorker who has ever felt invisible. I am running for every New Yorker that demands equality. We must do better. We must pursue and defend policies that create a more fair and just city for every single person that calls New York City home. That’s something I have always fought for and a mission I hold myself to every day. I would be honored to continue fighting as this city’s next Public Advocate.
Ydanis Rodriguez	Ydanis Rodriguez currently represents the 10th District in the New York City Council which includes the neighborhoods of Washington Heights, Inwood and Marble Hill. His extensive community work has helped get to know the needs of the residents of his district. Rodriguez has been a leader in the areas of transportation, education and economic development. He’s also made a mark on issues such as affordable housing, health care and the environment. He’s been a champion of working families always fighting to make sure everyone has a better shot at upward mobility. He started his community activism during his days as a student at City College of New York where he succeeded in lowering school tuition and making college more affordable for working families. After college, he co-founded Gregorio Luperon High School in Washington Heights - a school whose main focus is to help recently arrived immigrants from Latin America transition to the US educational system. He also worked as a public educator for 13 years. As a legislator, he’s taken a lead role in the issues that matter New Yorkers the most. He’s focused on protect and improve women’s, immigrants’ and workers’ rights. He’s also been a champion of social justice. His efforts as one of the organizers of Occupy Wall Street were recognized by Time Magazine by declaring him “Person of the Year” in 2011. As Chairman of the Transportation Committee in the New York City Council he’s gotten 14 new laws in the books. His work include legislation to improve the safe of pedestrians and cyclists as well as the reduction of deaths by vehicular accidents. He’s also worked on expanding transportation options for underserved communities.

Anthony (Tony) Herbert	As the Public Advocate I will advocate to increase the amount of affordable housing for our veterans. For severely mentally ill homeless veterans, I support the conversion of unused hospital space in to supportive housing where those who need assistance can live independently near to the medical treatment they may need. I would use money budgeted for homeless shelters to pay for the conversions because shelters are dangerous and are a big money business.
Nomiki Konst	The number one duty of our next Public Advocate must be to fight for reform and against the corruption in city government that is obscuring and crowding out the interests of communities like veterans, pushing their needs so far down the list of priorities that they are never addressed. I believe that NYC's veteran community will be best served by a Public Advocate who approaches this job as an activist. We have a rare and vital opportunity for the city to elect an experienced activist to political office — someone who is not a career politician and who would not treat the role as another stepping stone. As an activist candidate without a political background, I am strongly suited to fulfill the office's role as a watchdog and as a true representative of the public interest.
Dawn Smalls	My candidacy is really rooted in the central tenet that I want to make sure government works, and I want to make sure it works for you. This includes the newly created Department of Veterans' Services, and the important role it plays servicing the veteran community in the city.
Eric A. Ulrich	As your next Public Advocate, I will be the strongest friend and ally to the veterans' community.
Benjamin Yee	<p>I'm running on three programs to empower New Yorkers in city decision making:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Civics For All Civic knowledge empowers people. I've seen it firsthand teaching civics to thousands of New Yorkers who have made their communities heard. Civics For All brings that power to everyone with workshops, online guides, and a "Political 311" hotline. In person, online or over the phone, everyone has problems which they need civics to solve.</li> <li>2. Power for Communities We need community driven city planning. Currently, City Hall forces communities to react to proposals it speeds through approval. The Public Advocate should use its resources to convene community stakeholders and build a shared, proactive vision of how New York should develop. Then, it should support plans with buy in from all communities. If our civic institutions and local advocates were united, elected officials would have to reckon with their plan. No ambitious politician wants to upset every community at once.</li> <li>3. Justice for New Yorkers Expands litigation of the office beyond bad landlords to bad actors like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- employers committing wage theft</li> <li>- a board of elections illegally purging voters</li> <li>- a city that fails to enforce community concessions from big developers</li> </ul> </li> </ol>