



**Statement of Vadim Panasyuk**  
**Sr. Veteran Transition Manager, VA Benefits Lead**  
*of*  
**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America**  
*before the*  
**New York City Council Committee on Veterans**

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Chairman Deutsch and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on the pending legislation. I am a New Yorker, a Ukrainian expatriate, and naturalized citizen, and a US Army veteran having served two tours of duty with the 3rd Infantry Division in Iraq. At IAVA, I am a masters-level social worker serving as a Senior Veteran Transition Manager (VTM), VA Benefits Lead, with our Rapid Response Referral Program - or “RRRP” for short.

RRRP is a high-tech, high-touch referral service for veterans and their families with a comprehensive case management component. We assist veterans of all eras, regardless of discharge status, worldwide in confronting significant challenges like unemployment, financial or legal struggles, homelessness, and mental health related issues. To date, RRRP has served over 9,000 veterans and family members nationwide, and over 1,000 in New York City alone, providing critical support and resources to ensure that this city's veteran's needs are effectively met.

After fourteen years, IAVA has become the preferred empowerment organization for post-9/11 veterans. While our members are spread throughout the nation, we are proud to say that our national headquarters is located here in New York City. Since its beginning, IAVA has fought for and has been successful in advocating for policies that are able to meet the needs of our newest generation of veterans, which includes our advocacy towards the creation, proper funding, and oversight of the Department of Veterans Services (DVS).

IAVA has a proud history of being at the forefront of equal rights for all servicemembers and veterans. Based on feedback and guidance from our membership during our annual member survey, we became the first mainstream veterans organization to come out in support of repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). As then-Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen said lifting the ban on known gay and lesbian service members was “a matter of integrity - theirs as individuals and ours as a nation.” We stand by the fact that diversity is a force



multiplier for our armed forces and IAVA is proud of its record of being on the right side equality issues within the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA).

Promoting Equality for all Troops and Veterans remains a key part of IAVA's policy agenda. In addition to supporting the repeal of DADT, IAVA endorsed the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). In an *amicus curiae* brief filed with the Supreme Court before their ruling, IAVA argued not only that DOMA was morally wrong and unconstitutional, it also impeded force readiness and negatively impacted unit cohesion and morale. IAVA also supported the 2016 decision to allow transgender troops to serve openly without the threat of discharge, and have recently come out against any potential changes to that policy.

It is with this long history of promoting equality for all of our veterans and servicemembers that IAVA supports the intention behind both of the bills before the Council today, Int. 479 and Int. 1218. We recognize that the changes of status and benefits available to LGBT troops and veterans in the past could leave many of them confused or unaware of what is available to them. This problem is compounded by veterans who are disconnected from the VA and DoD because of their discharge status. Many veterans may not be aware that they can change their discharge status. Others may feel shunned or fearful of the VA because of their discharge status. In my experience, these veterans are often the most vulnerable in the population. As a VTM, I have worked with almost 400 veterans and their families. One hundred sixty-two had a less than honorable discharge while making up a fraction of the total veteran population. Due to loss of access to programs and benefits, as well as the stigma associated with their discharge status, these veterans often have a much more difficult road ahead when they transition back.

While IAVA supports the intention of the bills, we do have concerns over implementation. Upgrading a discharge status can be an extremely lengthy legal process. Additionally, there are already processes in the nonprofit sector that will help veterans upgrade their discharge status free of charge. IAVA is concerned that the passage of these bills could create confusion among the nonprofit and veterans community. DVS may be better served to complement these existing services rather than competing or duplicating them.

Veterans discharged solely because of their sexual orientation or identity deserve the full benefits of the VA and New York's DVS. IAVA is encouraged by Int. 1218's focus on communication for its services in assisting veterans with their discharge status. However, it may be better served to use the existing government outreach services to complement existing nonprofit's discharge assistance. We also encourage the Council and DVS to go beyond just posting about these services on their website, but also to have an outreach plan through email, social media, and other means in order to maximize awareness of these existing programs. As noted earlier, many



veterans may no longer be connected to the VA or DoD community because of their discharge status.

Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these issues today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and working with the Committee in the future.