



Statement of Vadim Panasyuk
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of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
New York City Council Committee on Veterans

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Chairman 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. My name is Vadim Panasyuk. I am a New Yorker, a Ukrainian expatriate, a naturalized citizen, an Iraq war veteran having served two tours with the 3rd Infantry Division, and masters level social worker working as Senior Manager, Client Services with IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program, or "RRRP" for short. RRRP is IAVA's high-tech, high-touch referral service for veterans and their families with a complete and comprehensive case management component. We assist veterans of all eras, with any discharge status, worldwide in confronting significant challenges like unemployment, financial or legal struggles, homelessness, and mental health-related issues. To date, RRRP has served almost 10,000 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 veterans' needs are effectively met.

After fifteen 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 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 for the creation, proper funding, and oversight of the Department of Veterans Services (DVS).

DVS has enormous potential and its establishment was a historic moment for veterans of this city. DVS can serve to significantly streamline access and improve service delivery to many of the most critical veteran-specific programs and resources already available here. Today we are here to report what we are seeing on the ground as it relates to VetConnectNYC to better inform this Committee's decisions as they relate to the oversight of this critical program as it continues to take shape and deeper integrates into the services infrastructure of our great city.

To date, RRRP has assisted 168 VetConnectNYC clients. During the last four years at IAVA, I've had the pleasure to work with many at VetConnectNYC and I have found them to be mission-driven, very responsive, and easy to work with. Their diligence in follow-up with providers to ensure services are being delivered and their clients' needs are met is truly impressive. VetConnectNYC continues to stay proactive in collaboration with programs like ours

by scheduling annual meetings between RRRP and VetConnectNYC senior staff. This includes higher-level decision-makers, intending to elicit comprehensive feedback and ensure optimal collaboration. These meetings do bear fruit. For example: over the last few years we've been experiencing challenges in seamlessly receiving referrals. We are happy to report that due to wide-open channels of communication between our team and VetConnectNYC staff we've been able to better integrate VetConnectNYC referrals into our day-to-day workflow. The way their intake is structured helps us to not duplicate the work already done because we can clearly see what other services the veteran is already receiving.

However, other challenges persist. We view the requirement to use the VetConnectNYC software to participate in the network to be a barrier, limiting the number and types of programs available through VetConnectNYC. Furthermore, we do not find the internal referral component comprehensive enough as it relates to programs and services represented there. The increase in the amount of digital paperwork needed to sync the work of our case management team and VetConnectNYC continues to be a hindrance as well.

Another clear deficit we can see is the lack of a comprehensive case management component and over-reliance on programs like ours to make connections to resources not available in the VetConnectNYC network of resources. This includes various Catholic Charities around the city, certain housing programs, as well as programs headquartered in other states which deliver emergency financial assistance, employment counseling and legal services on a national scope, thus further limiting options VetConnectNYC staff have when working to meet their clients' needs.

We are looking to DVS to adequately fund and expand VetConnectNYC. We support programs that deliver critical and relevant services to veterans in need quickly and effectively. After all, our own RRRP team has been pioneering this approach since 2012. We've been doing it on a national scale, with fewer resources and a smaller team. While our approach is similar, the deficiencies I have mentioned so far are stunting VetConnectNYC's growth, deeper integration into the veteran services infrastructure in New York City and nationally, and ultimately limit the potential of this program.

As VetConnectNYC continues to find its footing as a platform, we encourage this committee to provide them with the oversight and tools they need to be successful. We are hopeful that DVS will be able to find solutions to these issues as it continues to implement various program quality enhancements.

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.