



Statement for the Record

Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs:

2024 Veteran Service Organization Hearings

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April 19, 2024

Introduction: Our Work and Policy Priorities

Chairmen Tester and Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement of the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families' (IVMF) 2024 priorities today.

The IVMF was founded as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. The IVMF team designs and delivers class-leading training programs and services to the military-connected community, in support of the transition from military to civilian life and beyond. Each year, more than 20,000 service members, veterans, and family members engage IVMF programs and services, which are provided at largely no cost to participants. Our programs span a variety of categories, from entrepreneurship and career training to connecting individuals with local resources in their communities. The IVMF's programs are underpinned by the Institute's sustained and robust data collection, applied research on the most pressing issues impacting veteran well-being, and evaluation services for public and private partners who also serve the military-connected population.

Our policy work and priorities are directly informed by insights from our programmatic, research, and evaluation efforts, as well as what we hear from our partners across the country – federal, state, and local agencies, higher education, national and community nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector. We remain committed to being part of the effort to knit

together the patchwork of support greatly needed to improve how veterans and their families access and navigate care and resources.

We appreciate the invitation to submit a Statement for the Record and commend the Committees' efforts in years past on efforts that emphasize the importance of cross-agency and government-community collaboration, empowered by landmark legislation such as the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act (PACT Act), the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act (Hannon Act), and others. This collaboration is beginning to bear fruit and remains essential. We stand ready to continue this work as we support federal legislators in creating actionable solutions to address the problems facing our nation's veterans.

Below, we offer specific areas for legislative focus that align with each of the Institute's broader policy priorities: *Integrate Health and Social Care*, *Improve the Military to Civilian Transition*, and *Expand Economic Opportunity for Veterans and Military Spouses*. In summary, they are as follows:

1. Priority: Integrate Health and Social Care

- Sustain, improve, and expand recent collaborative efforts that involve communities in suicide prevention and social drivers of health
- Establish standards for data and outcome capture to improve interoperability and accountability

2. Improve the Military to Civilian Transition

- Provide tailored, upstream support for transitioning service members and their families
- Facilitate stronger coordination between DoD, VA, states, and communities for benefits and services

3. Expand Economic Opportunity for Veterans and Military Spouses

- Ensure sustainability for evidence-based employment programs at the point of transition
- Identify areas for cross-agency collaboration to ease navigation of and access to the entrepreneurship ecosystem
- Improve accessibility and accountability of education benefits for veterans and their families

Moving the needle on these difficult challenges requires upstream interventions and systemic, integrated approaches – both whole of government and public-private partnerships. They also require investment in ongoing research, measurement, and evaluation to keep our efforts aligned with the specific and evolving needs of the military-connected population, to ensure our efforts are effective at meeting those needs, and to scale the efforts that work best.

In order to maintain and strengthen our nation's all-volunteer force, we must implement policies that enable all of us to contribute to and remain accountable for ensuring veterans and their families are equipped to thrive in their post-service lives.

Considerations for Legislative Focus

Policy Priority: Integrate Health and Social Care

Background:

For ten years, the IVMF has played a key role in creating, sustaining, and evaluating networks of health and social service organizations – originally as part of our [AmericaServes initiative](#) working alongside 18 communities across the country. Mirroring a growing body of evidence in healthcare more broadly, AmericaServes and other collective impact models have demonstrated that helping veterans navigate to the full scope of services and resources they need – beyond clinical interventions alone – is an integral component of suicide prevention efforts.

It is also well documented in research and practice that health, economic, and social needs rarely emerge in isolation. A [2019 study by VA researchers](#) found that the presence of an adverse social stressor such as unemployment, housing or financial instability was related to a 64% increase in the likelihood of suicidal ideation. With each additional issue, this likelihood only increased.

We also know from a VA-funded [pilot study](#) the IVMF conducted with the [VA Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion](#) that communities unequivocally play a role in the system of care for veterans. We found that many veterans enrolled in VA healthcare are also receiving wraparound services in their communities, that communities were supporting more marginalized and struggling veterans, and that these veterans' stressors are better addressed when communities and VA Medical Centers work together.

Consequently, addressing the upstream, non-medical drivers of mental health that contribute to a veteran's overall health outcomes and risk of suicide requires far more than just the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA), Defense (DoD), Labor (DOL), and other interagency partners. Solutions necessitate comprehensive, cross-sector coordination with the tens of thousands of veteran-serving community based organizations (CBOs) across the country.

Legislative Focus: Sustain, improve, and expand recent collaborative efforts that involve communities in suicide prevention and social drivers of health.

Established in 2020 with the passing of the Hannon Act, the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (SSG Fox SPGP) plays a vital role in addressing the pressing issue of veteran suicide in the United States. By providing funding to CBOs to address underlying causes of veteran suicide in addition to facilitating referrals for clinical care, the SSG Fox SPGP recognizes the complex nature of factors leading to veteran suicide and takes meaningful action to partner with and support communities in the prevention effort.

As the SSG Fox SPGP approaches its third year of implementation, we strongly encourage Congress to consider legislative avenues to codify the program and allocate sustainable funding to provide for its continuation. We further encourage the Committee to solicit feedback and insight from SSG Fox SPGP grantees on opportunities to strengthen program implementation and measurement, particularly around adapting eligibility criteria, enhancing data collection and transparency, and streamlining pathways into VA care.

The IVMF has previously submitted a brief for the record containing feedback from 11 grantees alongside testimony at the SVAC hearing on September 20, 2023. The IVMF is in the process of updating this brief with more recent findings, but the takeaway is this: with continued support and enhancements, the SSG Fox SPGP can live up to its potential as a critical way to reach veterans in communities and connect them with the full scope of services they need – before they are in crisis, before it’s too late.

The SSG Fox SPGP is only one of many programs that seek to address social needs to improve health outcomes. Agency efforts that recognize and push for more systemic approaches – most notably the Governor’s and Mayor’s Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families and the development and implementation of Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) – are at critical junctures and would similarly benefit from additional resources to maintain the momentum from their early successes. In particular, the VA would benefit from offering more funding mechanisms to states and communities for implementation and evaluation of these evidence-based interventions.

Legislative Focus: Establish standards for data and outcome capture to improve interoperability and accountability.

With this expansion of more comprehensive interventions also comes the need for enhanced standards for data collection and evaluation. From IVMF research and evaluation data, we know that establishing accountability and transparency between the VA and communities is both achievable and necessary if we want veterans to thrive.

For example, from the evaluation of AmericaServes data in Pittsburgh, we know that hundreds of veterans are referred between the VA and the community annually. Because these cases are meticulously tracked, we know that individuals referred by the VA are most in need of household goods and transportation. We know how many individuals are provided with their DD-214s to smooth the way for assessing eligibility and enrollment in benefits. We know that referrals are typically matched to an appropriate organization within 24 hours and that their needs are successfully resolved around 90% of the time once they connect with the organization. The VA has full access to this data. This level of transparency and monitoring is possible – it is also happening in places like North Carolina and Texas, to name a few.

At the same time, this level of tracking and measurement requires time and effort on the part of CBOs which operate with limited resources. The more grants and programs they manage, the more platforms they are required to utilize, and the more inefficient operations and reporting become. Federal agencies face similar challenges – multiple systems, data collected in slightly different ways, limited accountability, and others.

Research has documented the need for [data standards](#) and [interoperability](#), and the [federal government](#), including [VHA](#), has recognized this issue and begun to take important steps forward to meet these challenges. We encourage Congress to explore legislative opportunities to incorporate standards for data collection practices and measurement of interventions that connect individuals to community resources. These standards should be informed by the current evidence base of programs and systems that demonstrate the most effective outcomes. They should be

broad enough that multiple existing interventions could adapt and conform to meet them, but prescriptive enough to ensure that CBOs and providers are accountable to practices we know are feasible. Importantly, they should be both crafted and implemented in partnership with communities serving veterans and military families.

IVMF Policy Priority: Improve the Military to Civilian Transition

Background:

Each year, it is [estimated](#) that 200,000 service members transition from serving in the Armed Forces to civilian life, forcing many of these new veterans to face a series of overwhelming challenges. Data from the Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) over the years consistently shows that at least two out every five veterans surveyed did not think they and their family were well-prepared to successfully navigate the transition from military to civilian life. For example, in the [2023 MFLS](#), the majority of veterans reported that their transition from military to civilian life was difficult. Post-service economic and financial stability are critical, particularly in the first few months and years after a veteran leaves the service. In fact, [VA researchers](#) now coin this initial period after separation as “the deadly gap” when transitioning veterans are more likely to die by suicide than later in life. This is why we, as a nation, must “get transition right” for our service members and their families.

However, transitioning out of the military is also more than a moment in time; veterans and their families have different needs before, during, and after the point of transition. We know that groups within the military-connected population have different needs as well. More broadly, research shows that preparedness is related to ease of transition for veterans. Therefore, our collective approach to transition must move beyond the transitioning service member and Transition Assistance Program (TAP).

Legislative Focus: Provide tailored, upstream support for transitioning service members and their families.

We appreciate increased efforts to bring more focus to and improve how we manage transition for the entire family unit. To continue this work, Congress should consider a range of options to address these evolving needs, including bolstering long-term financial support, offering specific support for military families, and augmenting TAP.

For example, Congress might explore options to work with partners to develop a separate transition program for spouses and family members. At the point of transition, service members have a wealth of resources made available to them. While some of these resources are open to their spouses and family members, none are specifically designed for them. A program specifically for this population – not a duplication of TAP – would improve awareness of and connection to resources, both at the point of separation and beyond.

Congress might also consider legislative solutions that make it easier for military spouses to connect to resources, as they are often the ones managing household finances. Shifting from a reactionary to a long-term preparation mindset for financial and economic stability will mitigate problems before they arise and prevent individuals from having to navigate through crises.

Planning is critical to achieving this goal, as are partnerships with civilian companies and organizations.

Legislative Focus: Facilitate stronger coordination between DoD, VA, states, and communities for benefits and services.

The VA, states, and communities also have a need to prepare for transitioning service members and their families. Without being aware of a veteran's presence, community organizations and government services cannot effectively address needs in a timely manner. Connecting individuals to services as soon as possible is integral to crisis prevention. To do this efficiently and effectively, there is a need to decrease barriers for the individual and increase collaboration between DoD and VA, DoD and states, and government and community entities.

As one promising solution, we hope that Congress will pass the Welcome Home Veterans Act of 2023. States recognize that veterans and their families are assets to their communities and economy, and they are actively striving to be great places for this population to transition and live. This legislation would support their efforts to ensure warm handoffs and enrollment in benefits and services at the state and local level. Additionally, we encourage Congress to consider legislative efforts that reduce the barrier to enrollment in benefits for those we know are eligible due to the nature of their service records.

IVMF Policy Priority: Expand Economic Opportunity for Veterans and Military Spouses

Background:

Individuals may choose to pursue many avenues after transitioning out of the service – entering the workforce, exploring entrepreneurship, pursuing higher education. We should ensure that no matter the pathway, veterans and their families are equipped to thrive.

Legislative Focus: Ensure sustainability for evidence-based employment programs at the point of transition.

Critical to a service member's successful transition from active duty to civilian life is their ability to secure meaningful employment and financial stability; however, the majority of veterans do not have a job secured after leaving the service, and about half are unemployed for four months or more following their time in the service. As mentioned previously, this gap between the time of military discharge and civilian employment can have enormous financial, social, and personal costs and can lead to increased rates of veteran homelessness, substance abuse, and other negative outcomes.

Finding meaningful careers after service is among the greatest stressors during this pivotal time. Analyses by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University (PSU), who run a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans called [The Veteran Metrics Initiative](#), have identified that the frequency of suicidal thinking increases over time for those in transition who experience persistent work and financial problems, particularly for women veterans. A quality job provides purpose, identity, and the financial security to ensure all other aspects of the veteran families' wellness can be effectively addressed for years to come.

For this reason, many programs have been created by federal agencies and the nonprofit sector to provide training, upskilling, job placement, and other career preparation services. For example, seven years ago the IVMF launched the [Onward to Opportunity \(O2O\)](#) program. O2O provides career exploration and employability skills training, along with access to industry-recognized certifications to over 10,000 transitioning service members, veterans, and spouses every year at no cost. The program operates on 19 military communities, reaching over 70 installations across the country and provides virtual training to participants in all 50 states. O2O is one of the largest career skills programs operating under the DoD SkillBridge Authority.

The federal government has also invested in dozens of employment-oriented services for transitioning service members. We commend the DOL's Veteran Employment Training Services (DOL-VETS) for establishing and implementing the [Employment Navigator and Partnership Program \(ENPP\)](#). Offered outside of the formal DOL Transition Assistance Program classroom instruction, DOL navigators assist transitioning service members and spouses in securing meaningful and lasting post-separation careers. IVMF's Onward to Opportunity program was onboarded in the second wave of national partners to join ENPP and is one of the program's larger referral partners.

As highlighted in the recent legislative hearing from the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, this program is a successful example of how public-private partnerships can address a critical need at the point of transition. At the same time, it takes substantial contribution from community partners – in the form of time, finances, and personnel – to produce this value and positive outcomes for transitioning service members. We encourage Congress to continue to build on this positive development by seriously considering legislative opportunities that would explore ways for DOL to provide sustainable funding to ENPP partner organizations. These continued partnerships are necessary to provide robust career training and job placement services to transitioning service members and spouses.

There are other existing supports in place for transitioning service members and their families that represent successful public-private partnerships. Cross-sector initiatives like these – those that pull together and integrate federal, state, and local community partners – are essential parts of our transition support system. Importantly, they hold the most promise to address economic risk factors to veteran suicide.

The IVMF has worked with committee staff and other career preparation and training organizations to introduce legislation that would reinforce and expand these evidence-based programs. We hope Congress will consider additional ways to allocate more resources to effective, evidence-based programs that deliver positive outcomes for veterans and their families. We stand ready to provide continued support by offering feedback on legislative language and offering data and evaluation results on effective programs.

Legislative Focus: Identify areas for cross-agency collaboration to ease navigation of and access to the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Entrepreneurship is another viable pathway for many transitioning service members, veterans, and their families. The IVMF contributes to the entrepreneurship ecosystem with eleven national

training programs and three tailored information hubs, each designed to meet veteran entrepreneurs where they are in their business journey. The IVMF has provided business ownership training to more than 75,000 military-connected entrepreneurs over the past decade and navigation services to 35,000 individuals – all at no cost to the veteran. Additionally, the IVMF recently acquired Bunker Labs, whose program participants have created nearly 9,000 jobs, raised over \$300 million in capital, and generated over \$2.3 billion in revenue. Together, our two organizations are even better positioned to make it easier for aspiring military-connected entrepreneurs to succeed in entrepreneurship.

We also know from our research, including our National Survey of Military-Affiliated Entrepreneurs (NSMAE), that the challenges faced by veteran entrepreneurs typically revolve around three central themes: access to capital, navigation of entrepreneurial resources, and leveraging human and social capital. The IVMF has submitted previous testimony to the Small Business Committees, encouraging Congress to consider several options for addressing these challenges and acknowledging the critical role of the Small Business Administration (SBA) in empowering veteran entrepreneurs. As with other government efforts, the SBA cannot address all challenges alone. Their work to support access to and navigation of resources through public-private partnerships continue to help create a responsive ecosystem. The VA's Office of Small & Disadvantaged Business Utilization also has a role play in this collaboration. We hope Congress might evaluate current programming and resources across agencies to ensure they provide direct and simplified pathways to existing resources.

Finally, the need for continued research to understand the unique needs of military-connected individuals cannot be overstated. For example, we know that over 46% of veteran entrepreneurs find it challenging to access resources in their local communities, with rural business owners preferring in-person assistance, highlighting a disparity in resource availability. Navigational challenges disproportionately impact women and veterans of color, fostering feelings of being unsupported. We must understand these different needs so we can best address them.

Legislative Focus: Improve accessibility and accountability of education benefits for veterans and their families.

Access to educational opportunities is consistently a top reason many individuals join the military, with over [half of service members](#) citing education benefits as their top motivation for joining the military. In particular, educational opportunities are cited by [women veterans](#), [Black and African American veterans](#), and [Hispanic and Latino veterans](#) as the number one motivation for entering into military service. For [Native American veterans](#), it's ranked second.

Moreover, higher education can be a gateway into a meaningful long-term career as well as higher lifetime earnings. By making educational benefits – in particular, the GI Bill – easy to access and utilize, we can ensure military service is attractive to the next generation while providing financial stability for both those seeking higher education and for their families. The VA has a responsibility to provide easy-to-use decision-making tools that allow veterans and their families to make informed decisions on the best investment for their goals and family circumstances. At the same time, higher education institutions have a responsibility to support successful outcomes for military-connected students.

To this end, we encourage Congress to explore opportunities to increase transparency and accessibility of the GI Bill Comparison Tool. As a whole, the GI Bill Comparison Tool could be improved to provide more frictionless, comprehensive, and reliable comparisons that best support decision-making. Solutions should be crafted through the lens of user experience, prioritizing streamlined data manipulations that incorporate the most up-to-date information on student veteran outcomes. In this improvement process, Congress might consider creating additional mechanisms to solicit feedback from student veterans, organizations, program providers, researchers, and experts to inform how policymakers can improve data collection, measure definitions, and ultimately the tools available to the public. Working toward this goal would also give us the insights to hold higher education institutions receiving GI Bill dollars more accountable over the experience and outcomes of military-connected students.

Conclusion

Ensuring veterans and their families thrive post-service is critical to our nation's all-volunteer force and therefore requires a whole of nation approach. The IVMF believes the above focus areas are among the most vital to this goal. We thank the Committees again for their continued commitment to serving those who serve, and we affirm our own commitment to offer insights from our research and practice.