



Testimony

Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs:

2025 Veteran Service Organization Hearings

Prepared by:

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Introduction: Our Work and Policy Priorities

Chairmen Moran and Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and distinguished Members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today, related to the 2025 programmatic and policy priorities of the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families' (IVMF) at Syracuse University.

About the IVMF

The IVMF was founded in 2011, as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing economic, social, and wellness outcomes on behalf of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. In support of that mission, the IVMF team designs and delivers class-leading programs and supportive services to the military-connected community, positioning them for a successful transition from military to civilian life. 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 offerings 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.

Accordingly, the IVMF's policy priorities are directly informed by insights from our programmatic, research, and evaluation efforts, as well as from engagements with the IVMF's

many external partners including from the public sector, higher education, national and community nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector. We remain committed to contributing to the effort to knit together the patchwork of support greatly needed to improve how veterans and their family's access and navigate care and resources.

We appreciate the invitation to testify and commend the Committees' efforts in years past on efforts that emphasize the importance of cross-agency and public-private collaboration, enabled 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. These collaborations are beginning to bear fruit and remain essential. We stand ready to reinforce and improve these efforts for the future, and to contribute actionable solutions positioned to support and empower our nation's veterans and their families.

Summary of Policy Priorities and Legislative Areas of Focus

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

1. Integrate Health and Non-Clinical Care

- Sustain, improve, and expand recent collaborative efforts that involve communities in suicide prevention upstream from crisis.
- Establish standards for data and outcome capture to reduce bureaucratic barriers and improve accountability and efficiency.

2. Improve the Military to Civilian Transition

- Ensure accountability and sustainability for evidence-based employment programs at the point of transition.
- Provide tailored, upstream support for transitioning service members as well as their families.
- Facilitate stronger coordination between the DoD, VA, states, and communities for benefits and services.

3. Expand Economic Opportunity for Veterans and Military Spouses

- Increase support for public-private partnerships that leverage the talent and skills veterans bring to our nation's workforce.
- Build on efforts to collaborate across agencies to ease navigation of and access to the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Moving the needle on these difficult challenges requires upstream interventions and integrated approaches that reduce barriers between agencies and champion public-private partnerships. They also require investment in ongoing evaluation and oversight to keep our efforts aligned with the specific and evolving needs of the military-connected population, to ensure our efforts are efficient and 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 the public, private, and nonprofit sectors 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 Non-Clinical Care

Background:

It is evident from the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) most recent [National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#) that the rate of death by suicide is still unacceptably high, still exceeds the rate for civilians, and still does not fully encompass the rate among the National Guard and Reserve population.

It is also well documented in research and practice that health, economic, housing, and other needs rarely emerge in isolation. A [2019 study by VA researchers](#) found that the presence of an adverse 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 intensified.

For ten years, the IVMF has played a key role in creating, sustaining, and evaluating networks of health and wraparound services—originally as part of our [AmericaServes initiative](#) working alongside 18 communities across the country. AmericaServes and other public-private partnership models have demonstrated that helping veterans navigate to the full scope of services and resources they need—beyond clinical and crisis interventions alone—is an integral component of suicide prevention efforts.

Additionally, we know from a [pilot study](#) the IVMF conducted with VA researchers that approximately 70% of veterans receiving support via AmericaServes were enrolled in VA healthcare. The study also found that the level of collaboration between VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and AmericaServes varied widely, but that *veterans’ stressors were better addressed when community organizations and VAMCs worked together*. Further, it is clear from this evidence that *communities are reaching veterans yet to be connected to the VA*, which data has shown is associated with a lower risk of suicide.

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 VA and other interagency partners. Solutions necessitate comprehensive, cross-sector coordination with the tens of thousands of organizations that serve veterans and their families across the country.

Legislative Focus: Sustain, improve, and expand recent collaborative efforts that involve communities in suicide prevention upstream from crisis.

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 persistent issue of veteran suicide in the United States. By providing funding to military- and veteran-serving organizations (MSOs and VSOs) 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 is considered for reauthorization, we are grateful to the Committees for their commitment to strengthening the program based on feedback from grantees and advocates. In 2023, the IVMF testified on this topic and submitted a brief for the record containing feedback from 11 grantees. We have continued to support our grantee partners and affirm our collective position: with enhancements, the SSG Fox SPGP can live up to its potential as a critical way to reach veterans in communities and connect them to support—before they are in crisis, before it is too late. Key areas we have identified for improvement are: 1) adjustment of allowable expenses to support higher enrollment, 2) examination of the screening process for efficiencies and eligibility assessment, 3) streamlining of pathways into care at the VA and for emergencies, and 4) appropriate data collection that supports program improvement and performance monitoring.

In addition to the SSG Fox SPGP, there have been other concerted efforts by the VA to recognize the value of networks of community organizations that help veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors with non-clinical needs. For example, the VHA Innovation Ecosystem is piloting a non-clinical care network platform to improve referral and communication efficiencies between VA and trusted wrap-around services. If successful, new and better approaches to non-clinical care for our most vulnerable veterans could be scaled.

Legislative Focus: Establish standards for data and outcome capture to reduce bureaucratic barriers and improve accountability and efficiency.

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 *within* the VA and *between* the VA and communities is both achievable and necessary if we want veterans to thrive.

VSOs and federal agencies face challenges of tracking and measuring across multiple systems, data collected in slightly distinct ways, limited accountability, and other constraints. Research has documented the need for [data standards](#) and [interoperability](#) to make accountability more feasible and efficient.

The [federal government](#), including [VHA](#), has recognized this issue and begun to take important steps forward to meet these challenges. For example, the inclusion of VBA data in the last five annual suicide prevention reports adds a crucial element to our understanding of those at risk. This type of analysis would be made easier with better internal alignment between VHA and VBA, so that it is the norm that we are able to bring the full scope of data available when addressing health and suicide challenges.

A number of communities have also demonstrated success with establishing common metrics and shared tracking systems. 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 documented, 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 wraparound service 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 the information about the patients they refer for these services. Places like North Carolina, Texas, and others have proven it is possible to achieve this level of transparency and monitoring.

Therefore, we encourage Congress to explore legislative opportunities to incorporate standards for data collection practices and measurement of interventions both inside the government and in partnership with the private and nonprofit sectors. 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 VSOs and providers are beholden to a minimum level of performance. Importantly, they should be both crafted and implemented in partnership with agency staff, VSOs, and experts to ensure feasibility.

IVMF Policy Priority: Improve the Military to Civilian Transition

Background:

Every year, an [estimated 200,000](#) service members transition out of the military. Many face challenges during the critical first three years outside the service, and [surveys show](#) that more than half of veterans find the transition to civilian life difficult. [The gap](#) between the time of military discharge and civilian employment can have enormous financial, social, and personal costs. An ability to secure meaningful employment and financial stability is critical to a service member's successful transition from active duty to civilian life.

Data shows that most veterans are seeking employment after service, even those also interested in school or starting a business. Further, about [62% of veterans are underemployed after 6.5 years](#). Yet, a [recent report](#) from RAND found that the federal government spends more than \$13 billion a year on military-to-civilian transition programs, mostly focused on education, even when removing the approximately \$9 billion of expenditures on the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Per RAND and the [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#) (GAO), this spending is allocated to 45 federal programs overseen by 11 federal agencies that help veterans transition—now 46 with the addition of the new Veteran and Spouse Transitional Assistance Grant Program. RAND found that *almost none of these programs have been rigorously or independently evaluated*, and that 27 programs have released no performance data.

Further, 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. Despite the abundance of programs, navigation to the right program at the right time continues to be a challenge.

Therefore, our collective approach to transition requires us to consider interventions further upstream and downstream, move beyond the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and

government alone, and—critically—implement more oversight and evaluation of our current system of supports to put resources to their first best use.

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

In addition to the many federal programs, nonprofits have also created programs that provide essential training, credentialing, job placement, and other career preparation services. For example, eight 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.

Veteran-serving, employment-focused nonprofit and private sector programs like O2O fill the gaps that federal programs are not well-suited to address. While a second report from RAND noted challenges nonprofits face with measurement of their employment services, some programs do track spending and performance to a fair extent. Notably, O2O is the only program that has undergone a rigorous third-party evaluation to prove its efficacy at helping transitioning service members—especially those in lower enlisted ranks—secure better salaries. Other nonprofits are beginning to follow suit, and data suggests there are organizations that deliver evidence-based programs more efficiently than the government. It takes substantial contribution from these organizations in the form of time, finances, and personnel to produce this value.

Further, the best available data about transition outcomes is from a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 veterans called [The Veteran Metrics Initiative](#) (TVMI), managed by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Pennsylvania State University. This type of information must be prioritized for collection by the government, and existing efforts such as the VA's Post-Separation Transition Assistance Program Assessment should better align with the validated metrics from TVMI.

Overall, it is time to standardize metrics for transition programs inside and outside government, increasing oversight and helping us improve the overall system of supports. Congress should ensure that existing federal programs are evaluated individually and collectively, so that we can restructure and enact holistic, systemwide reforms to better reach veterans. This system should also include ways to allocate more resources to effective, evidence-based nonprofit programs that deliver positive outcomes—outcomes that currently are primarily being delivered and measured because of philanthropic support.

Legislative Focus: Provide tailored, upstream support for transitioning service members as well as 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 offering specific support for military families and finding ways to help service members and their families prepare for transition beyond TAP alone.

At the point of transition, service members are presented with a wealth of resources available to them. While some of these resources are open to their spouses and family members, none are specifically designed for these individuals. For example, while there have been efforts to integrate spousal support into existing TAP components, there may be room for improvement.

Preliminary, unpublished data from our most recent collaboration on the Blue Star Families Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) showed that 32% of spouses of veteran respondents that went through the military transition process utilized TAP and found it helpful. However, 17% said they used TAP but found it unhelpful, and 51% said that they did not engage with TAP during their family's military transition. Anecdotally, spouses of veterans and separating service members have cited numerous reasons for not engaging with TAP, including scheduling difficulties, lack of understanding about what TAP is, and/or little to no knowledge that their attendance is encouraged.

At the same time, 36% of military spouses did indicate they found resources through information provided at TAP. So, while spouses of veterans deploy many informal networks (such as friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc.) in their transition information-seeking process, formal channels such as TAP remain important and relevant, particularly for those who may not necessarily have a robust informal network of supports.

To provide tailored and more useful support, Congress might explore options to work with MSOs and VSOs to develop a separate transition program for spouses and family members. 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 navigate to resources, as they are often the ones managing household finances and their children's education goals.

Finally, we recognize that being able to adequately prepare for military transition may positively impact both the transition experience and long-term outcomes for veterans. For example, data from MFLS shows that veteran respondents who felt “unprepared” for military transition also perceive the overall process to be “difficult.” Additionally, preliminary results suggest that being prepared for military transition has implications for veterans' general sense of satisfaction and belonging to a local community. Further, those who felt prepared also endured fewer relocations. Taken together, these community factors—satisfaction, belonging, fewer relocations—may be connected to general well-being for veterans.

Overall, shifting from a reactionary to a long-term preparation mindset for economic stability and integration into communities 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. Connecting individuals to services as soon as possible is integral to crisis prevention. Without being aware of a veteran's presence, government and community services

cannot effectively address needs in a timely manner. To do this efficiently and effectively, we need to decrease barriers for the individual, which requires decreasing barriers between DoD and VA, DoD and states, and government and community entities.

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. We encourage Congress to come to an agreement on recent legislative proposals that would support efforts to ensure warm handoffs and enrollment in benefits and services at the state and local level. Additionally, we encourage Congress to consider ongoing legislative efforts that reduce the barrier to enrollment in benefits and healthcare for those that choose to do so once they officially separate from the military.

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

Background:

As previously mentioned, individuals may choose to pursue many avenues after transitioning out of the service, often concurrently—including entering the workforce, exploring entrepreneurship, and pursuing higher education. We should ensure that no matter the pathway, veterans and their families are equipped to thrive.

Legislative Focus: Increase support for public-private partnerships that leverage the talent and skills veterans bring to our nation’s workforce.

Veterans bring value to the workforce across many industries vital to America’s economic prosperity. In the energy sector, which [employs a large share of veterans](#), nonprofits such as [Common Defense](#) and the [Clean Grid Alliance](#) recognize that military skills translate well to energy jobs. In the semiconductor industry, memory chip giant [Micron Technology](#) is [investing in a military talent pipeline](#) in partnership with the IVMF through our O2O program to fill roles in what will become the largest semiconductor manufacturing facility in the country. Similarly, we have partnered with Google to offer free access to their AI Essentials Course and their cybersecurity certificate for O2O participants. These examples highlight opportunities for transitioning service members to both build meaningful post-service careers and strengthen our nation’s energy and technology infrastructure.

As the administration and Congress work to reinvigorate American manufacturing and other key industries, we have a powerful opportunity to recognize the assets of veterans and apply their considerable skills in a meaningful way post-service. Government, education, nonprofits, and the private sector must work together to ensure these pipelines exist so that veterans can access high-quality work opportunities essential to our nation.

Legislative Focus: Build on efforts to collaborate across agencies 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 more than a dozen 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 80,000 military-connected entrepreneurs and navigation services

to 37,500 individuals. Additionally, last year the IVMF 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 small business ownership.

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 barriers and challenges alone, and we appreciate collaborative efforts by the VA to support improved processes and programs. Your collective work to enhance access to and navigation of resources through public-private partnerships continue to help create a responsive ecosystem. At the same time, we need to continue to make it easier for veterans who wish to start and grow a business—from empowering connections between veteran business owners to streamlining and standardizing the quality of current government offerings. We welcome the opportunity to provide input based on the findings from our surveys and experience working closely with veteran entrepreneurs across industries and phases of growth.

Conclusion

Ensuring that our veterans and their families not only survive but truly thrive after service is essential to the strength and sustainability of our nation's all-volunteer force. This vital mission demands a comprehensive, whole-of-nation approach—one that cuts through bureaucratic hurdles and forges robust partnerships with nonprofit organizations and the private sector to deliver services with precision and impact.

At the D'Aniello IVMF, we are convinced that the focus areas outlined above represent some of the most critical priorities during this pivotal time. We deeply appreciate the Committees' steadfast commitment to serving those who have served our nation. In return, we reaffirm our own dedication to sharing our latest insights, backed by rigorous research and proven practice, to ensure that every veteran receives the support they deserve.