

Public Hearing, February 22, 2010
Assembly Standing Committees on Mental Health, Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and
Veterans' Affairs

Testimony of Wendy Brennan, Executive Director
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My name is Wendy Brennan and I'm the executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City (NAMI-NYC Metro). I would like to thank Assembly members and Committee Chairs Rivera, Ortiz, and Espaillat for taking a leadership role in addressing the needs of New York State's veterans and for holding this hearing today.

NAMI-NYC Metro was established more than 30 years ago as a support, education, and advocacy organization for people whose lives are impacted by mental illness. As one of the largest affiliates of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, we work to include the consumer and family voice in mental health service delivery in New York City and to meet the changing mental health needs of New York City residents.

NAMI-NYC Metro is the co-founder of the Veterans Mental Health Coalition of New York City along with the Mental Health Association of NYC. The coalition now has 150 members. NAMI-NYC Metro also participated in the development of the proposed Veterans Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Act. I am here today to ask the committee to support this vital legislation.

As you are well aware, New York State is home to more than one million men and women who have served in the armed forces. The mental health needs of the OEF / OIF Veterans population alone is staggering. Twenty percent of these veterans return with depression and/or PTSD, a large number of them with co-occurring disorders of mental illness and chemical dependency. Unfortunately, the existing service delivery system simply lacks the capacity to meet their needs and those of their families.

To help address the needs of veterans and their families, NAMI-NYC Metro partners with the Manhattan VA Hospital to offer peer-led support through our multi-week Family-to-Family and Peer-to-Peer courses. The local recovery coordinator at the VA hospital has championed these vital services and has been instrumental in helping NAMI bring them to the hospital. While we believe the Manhattan VA hospital and staff do excellent work, we are also aware that many veterans are either ineligible for VA services or choose not to use them for a variety of reasons, including the fear that future employment opportunities will be limited if a mental health diagnosis has been recorded.

Through NAMI's telephone Helpline and our substantial community outreach efforts, we also hear directly from family members and from veterans that mental health services are simply not available or appropriate to address their needs. Moreover, we are hearing that integrated services for co-occurring disorders are almost non-existent. This lack of integrated services is a longstanding problem in the mental health service delivery system, but with so many veterans returning with both mental illness and chemical dependency, it is nothing short of a crisis.

We believe that a fundamental first step to insuring access to quality integrated mental health services for veterans will be the passage of the Veterans Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Act. The Act calls for an annual state interagency planning effort, which will hopefully begin to address the lack of integrated mental health and substance abuse services by involving the key stakeholders. In addition, the proposed planning process recognizes the need to develop services outside the VA system to meet the needs of veterans and their families who are either ineligible for or choose not to use them. We believe future services must break down the barriers to accessing care, and are particularly supportive of the stipulation to enhance outreach efforts through the use of telephonic and Internet services, and by supporting peer-led programs.

We are aware that the New York State is facing an unprecedented fiscal crisis and that funding for new initiatives is not readily available. However, dedicating a small amount of money to support these planning efforts now will save lives in the future. The debt we owe to New York's veterans and their families—men and women who risked their lives for ours—is incalculable. We urge you to support this important legislation.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.