



Statement of Paul Rieckhoff, IAVA
HVAC/SVAC Joint Committee
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Statement of Paul Rieckhoff
Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees

May 20, 2015

Chairman Isakson, Chairman Miller, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Brown,
and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our nearly 400,000 members and supporters, thank you for the opportunity to share our policy priorities for 2015.

This time last year, I came before you to sound an alarm about our growing concern over suicide in the post-9/11 veteran community. This insight came out of IAVA's annual member survey last year, which is one of the largest non-governmental surveys of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. In response to this call,



we worked closely with you and your staff to conceive, draft, introduce, advocate for, and pass the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act.

The enormous bipartisan effort to get this bill passed was exemplary, and it showed the American public what Congress can achieve when pulling in the same direction. The road to passing the SAV Act was not without some bumps along the way, but together we got it done and we sincerely thank you for your help and support.

However, the Clay Hunt SAV Act was only the first step toward addressing the issue of suicide within the veteran community, and more work remains to be done. The VA now needs to swiftly and properly implement the SAV Act and Congress should continue working on next steps for a SAV Act 2.0.

Congressman Tim Murphy's H.R. 2131 is one piece of legislation that among others would move toward that vision as it would standardize and improve the VA drug formulary.

Female service members make up the fastest growing segment of our nation's military and veteran populations, and they account for 20 percent of IAVA membership and 35 percent of its leaders. In recognition of this, our Research



Department recently completed a seven city tour across the nation holding focus groups with female veterans. These events highlighted the challenges female veterans face accessing care from the VA. Female veterans highlighted multiple occasions where just being recognized as veterans by the VA was a challenge, receiving letters addressed to "Mr." or having to correct their medical chart, where they were listed as male.

Additionally, IAVA launched a women's veteran survey to gauge the challenges they face from a larger population of women. We received an unbelievable response from over 1,500 women vets. Our members are active users of VA medical services - the initial results of our women veterans survey show that 70 percent of respondents are enrolled in VA healthcare, and the majority have been enrolled for over two years and have sought care within the last six months. Yet, our initial analysis shows that about 70 percent of respondents rated the VA as fair, poor or very poor in their support provided to women veterans.

Additionally, less than half of respondents agreed with the statement that VA employees treat women vets with respect. While we're still analyzing the data, the preliminary responses and the experiences shared in IAVA's focus groups have highlighted that, while progress has been made, the VA (and the nation at



large) is still behind in recognizing and supporting this important population of veterans.

Turning now to military compensation reforms, there is no doubt the military benefits and retirement package is key to retaining top quality military personnel. IAVA applauds the House Armed Services Committee and Military Personnel Subcommittee Chairman Joe Heck, for addressing the need for retirement reform in the 2016 NDAA legislation.

IAVA membership consistently identify financial concerns as one of the major hurdles they face in the transition from military to civilian life. Providing financial literacy and having a more robust and transferable retirement option will hopefully alleviate this concern to allow veterans to focus on equally pressing matters such as employment or education.

Moving forward this summer, IAVA will continue to advocate for issues that are of great concern to our members. These include: protecting the Post-9/11 GI Bill and its transferability; reigning in the predatory practices of the for-profit education industry; ending sequestration for the defense budget; eliminating the



VA backlog; reducing veteran unemployment; and increasing access to quality health care for veterans who are injured in the line of duty.

In the wake of the crises and scandals that plagued the VA last year, IAVA worked with these two Committees to craft the proposals that would soon become the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act. While there have been acknowledged problems with implementing the Choice Act, we continue to support the goals of the legislation so that all veterans have access to the highest quality health care in a timely manner. In fact, our team testified in front of both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees just last week, providing technical recommendations on how to maximize the program's performance.

Since Secretary McDonald has been on the job, we must acknowledge that the VA has improved and continues to strive forward in its mission. The claims backlog has been significantly reduced, veteran homelessness is down, the VA finally worked out an agreement over homeless veteran housing in Los Angeles, and the Veterans Crisis Line remains a critical resource for veterans in need, and a key partner of IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program.



But it is no secret challenges still exist... Almost daily, reports surface outlining misdeeds or incompetence of VA employees. Admittedly while most of these did not happen under Secretary McDonald's watch, he must deal with these challenges as rapidly as possible. To that end, IAVA was happy to support Chairman Miller's bill, H.R. 1994 The VA Accountability Act, which would give the Secretary the authority to remove those bad actors within the VA in a more expedited manner than currently exists.

Secretary McDonald has asked Congress to provide him with the flexibility to overhaul and reform the VA. The Chairman's legislation is a good start.

Chairman Isakson, Chairman Miller, and all Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views and priorities with you here today. We look forward to working more with each of you, your staff, and both Committees in the 114th Congress to continue to improve the lives of service members, veterans and their families.