



Statement for the Record
 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
 Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
 November 18, 2015

Statement for the Record
 by **Tom Porter**
Legislative Director
 of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
hearing on
Pending Legislation

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Bill #	Bill Name or Subject	Sponsor	IAVA Position
S. 2106	Wounded Warrior Employment Improvement Act	Sen. Sherrod Brown	Supports
S. 2134	Grow Our Own Directive: Physician Assistant Employment and Education Act	Sen. Jon Tester	Supports
S. 2170	Veterans E-Health & Telemedicine Support Act (VETS Act)	Sen. Joni Ernst	Supports
S. 2253	Veterans Education Relief and Reinstatement Act	Sen. Richard Blumenthal	Supports
S. [Draft]	Veterans Affairs Retaliation Prevention Act	Sen. Mark Kirk	Supports

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and Distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members and supporters, I would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share our views regarding these pieces of legislation.

IAVA supports each of the bills before the Committee today. To varying levels, they address issues IAVA has highlighted in our updated Policy Agenda,



which was recently released and distributed to each of your offices. I would like to focus my testimony on the main areas that our members have expressed concern: (1) Accountability at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and (2) Defense of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Because one of IAVA's top priorities is accountability at the VA, we support Sen. Kirk's draft legislation which directs the VA to punish supervisors found to take retaliatory actions against whistleblowers. Time and again, we have heard whistleblowers from within the VA detailing abuses of veterans and how they have experienced retaliation for stepping forward. VA must ensure that retaliating against whistleblowers and veterans who complain about care does not happen. A culture of intimidation is inconsistent with accountability within the Department.

The common-sense provisions that establish strong punishments for violators, a formal process for filing complaints within the VA, a central whistleblower office separate from the General Counsel's office, and additional training for VA employees are welcome proposals to improve how veterans and well-meaning VA employees are treated by their government.

Another measure that would improve the services being delivered to our veterans is the *Wounded Warrior Employment Improvement Act* (S. 2106), which would require the VA Secretary to develop and publish an action plan for improving the vocational rehabilitation services and assistance provided by VA.

To underscore the importance of such programs, one of our members from Nebraska, an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, recently provided inspiring testimony across the Capitol before the House Veterans Committee on his use of the VetSuccess on Campus program. Through this valuable program,



he rebounded from numerous personal and professional setbacks and is now on a path to success. Seeing this young man testify before Congress after overcoming so many challenges exemplifies the empowered veteran we highlight online with the social media hashtag “Vets Rising.”

There is some satisfaction among our members that participate in the program. Our 2014 survey of our members showed that 12% of respondents rated VA’s Vocational Rehab services as “good,” but an equal percentage rated it as “neither good or bad” or “bad.” 76% have not used it.

Another of IAVA members’ top priorities is the defense of veteran and military education benefits, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which IAVA fought hard to establish. Many veterans using Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits have been adversely impacted when the schools they attended closed. According to the Veteran Benefits Administration, 70 VA-approved schools closed in FY 2013 and 2014, affecting 1,605 GI Bill beneficiaries. Just this past April, 422 veterans receiving Post-911 GI Bill benefits saw their education plans abruptly end when Corinthian Colleges closed 28 schools and filed for bankruptcy.

Because the receipt of GI Bill benefits is conditioned upon enrollment, veterans’ education benefits are suddenly discontinued when a school permanently closes. While the VA can pay benefits up to the time of the school’s closure, the student is charged with the entitlement for that term, but does not earn any credit toward his or her program completion. In addition, the housing benefit—oftentimes their primary or sole source of paying for lodging, food, and other basic necessities while attending school—is terminated the day the school closes.



IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program Team, made up of masters level case managers that has helped more than 6,000 veterans meet their goals through connections to quality resources and benefits, has taken steps to get veterans assistance with their education funds following school closures.

We understand that VA has the authority to continue payments for up to four weeks when schools are temporarily closed due to an emergency, but there is no similar statutory authority to continue benefits in the event of a permanent school closure.

For this reason, IAVA supports the *Veterans Education Relief and Reinstatement Act*, which would allow the VA to restore any Post-9/11 GI Bill entitlement for student veterans that fail to receive credit toward their educational goals due to a permanent school closure. It also directs the VA to continue paying the Post-9/11 GI Bill housing allowance until the end of the term—or up to four months, whichever is sooner—during which the school closure occurred.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has sent more than one million veterans to school, training America's next "greatest generation" for success in business and government careers. Although wildly successful, it is clear that all of us, including Congress, must be vigilant to ensure that the benefit lives up to its goals and to maintain the confidence of our veterans who depend on the benefit to transition to civilian life.

IAVA's members, and all veterans, deserve the very best our Nation can offer when it comes to fulfilling the promises made to them upon entry into the military. There is no doubt this Committee has the best interests of our veterans in mind when drafting legislation. But we do hope you take into consideration and implement what we, and our fellow veteran service organizations, have had to



say on these pieces of legislation today.

Thank you for your time and attention. IAVA is happy to answer any questions you may have.

**Biography of Tom Porter
Legislative Director, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**

Mr. Porter serves as IAVA's Legislative Director, leading his Team's Capitol Hill advocacy efforts to improve the lives of veterans and their families. Until joining IAVA this August, he served nearly 20 years on Capitol Hill on the staffs of three House Members and as a government relations consultant. Mr. Porter is also a Commander in the U.S. Navy Reserve, entering service in 1996 at the rank of E-3. His military tenure has included deployments to Afghanistan, the Arabian Gulf and other locations. Porter is a California Native and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from California State University San Bernardino in 1994.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Mr. Porter, nor the organization he represents, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, has received federal grant or contract funds relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or past two fiscal years.