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U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
HEARING ON THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VETERANS'
DISABILITY BENEFITS COMMISSION

IAVA TESTIMONY

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, I thank you for inviting me to testify this morning on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Founded in June 2004, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America is the nation's first and largest nonprofit and nonpartisan group dedicated to improving the lives of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families.

Every day, veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan face serious bureaucratic barriers to receiving fair compensation for their injuries. Everyone agrees that action must be taken to reform the system. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of plans have been put forth. The work of the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission, however, is unique in its scope and its thoroughness. The VDBC spent years studying the intricacies of the disability benefits system, uncovering and documenting gaps and flaws in this system, and producing a comprehensive document that should act as a road map to veterans' disability benefits reform.

Today, I would like to highlight three key recommendations put forward by the Commission.

First, streamlining the disability system. As the Commission concluded, there should be one DOD/VA medical evaluation and interoperable medical records. The DOD should determine fitness for duty, and should pay for a military pension or severance pay to those found unfit. The VA should determine the level of disability to compensate for loss of future earnings and quality of life. All of this should be communicated through Recommendation 5.21 by establishing a set of registries of service members and veterans based on exposure, deployment, and disease histories VA and DoD will finally be able to effectively communicate with service members and veterans.

Second, the entire VA disability benefits schedule should be revised. Disability ratings must take better account for the signature injuries of the Iraq War - PTSD and TBI. The May 2007 report by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council concluded that the VA's PTSD evaluation techniques are ineffective. According to the report, the criteria for mental disorders are "crude," "overly general," and unreliable. In addition, the report questioned the use of separate ratings for mental illnesses that often appear together (like PTSD and depression), the inconsistent criteria for rating relapsing/remitting conditions, and the use of "occupational impairment" as the sole metric for PTSD disability.

Finally, the rating schedule should also provide adequate compensation for both loss of earning capacity and loss of quality of life. Moreover, Congress must address the Commission's finding that young veterans are undercompensated. While such a system is being put in place, IAVA

recommends that compensation rates are increased while the Rating Schedule is revised, as recommended by the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission.

The question remains, however, whether and how these and other valuable recommendations will be implemented. Our concern is that the Commission's recommendations will join the work of many other commissions before them; collecting dust on a shelf. It is for that reason that we believe the most important recommendation of the Commission is their final one:

Congress should establish an executive oversight group to ensure timely and effective implementation of the Commission recommendations.

Along with the recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission and the work of the GAO and other government oversight agencies, Congress has been presented with effective solutions to many of the problems facing today's wounded warriors. It is up to you to take bipartisan action. By instituting an executive oversight group, Congress and the veterans' community can be assured that troops and veterans are getting the care they have earned.