

Todd Bowers, Director of Government Affairs Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

Testimony of  
Todd Bowers, Director of Government Affairs  
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America  
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) to testify today, and for giving us the opportunity to present our 2009 Legislative Agenda. On behalf of IAVA and our more than 125,000 members and supporters, I would also like to thank you for your unwavering commitment to our nation's veterans.

After seven years of war, it has never been more critical to care for our nation's newest warriors. I know, because I am one of them. I still serve as Staff Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. I have served two tours in Iraq, and just returned from an additional deployment last summer. At IAVA, we are committed to making sure that no servicemember, and no veteran, is ever left behind. The mission of IAVA is to improve the lives of the more than 1.7 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families. IAVA addresses critical issues facing our newest generation of heroes, including psychological and neurological injuries, a flawed disability benefits system, and the implementation of the historic new GI Bill. Founded in 2004 by a small group of Iraq veterans, IAVA is dedicated to educating the public about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, advocating on behalf of those who have served, and fostering a community for troops, veterans, and their families.

IAVA is proud to have worked in local communities, with the media, and in Washington to draw attention to the issues facing our troops and veterans, and to get those problems solved. Over the past four years, IAVA has grown into a driving force behind many legislative victories for veterans. In 2008, we saw unprecedented success. First and foremost was the passage of the new GI Bill, which will ensure an affordable college education for all veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. IAVA also worked to increase veterans' health care funding by \$4.5 billion, to improve benefits for disabled veterans, to expand suicide prevention, and to improve treatment for Traumatic Brain Injury. We have effectively partnered with many other Veteran and Military Service Organizations, the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs and members of Congress to make these successes a reality. We're the new kids on the block, but we have made a substantial impact, in a very short time. All in all, IAVA saw progress on 20 of our 28 legislative recommendations in 2008.

In 2008, IAVA also launched a historic Public Service Advertising (PSA) campaign in partnership with the Ad Council. The groundbreaking, multiyear effort seeks to ease the readjustment for servicemembers returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Joining such iconic Ad Council PSA campaigns as "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires" and "Friends Don't Let

Friends Drive Drunk," the groundbreaking Veteran Support campaign will feature TV, radio, print and online PSAs, both in English and in Spanish. Extensive research was conducted to develop the Veteran Support Campaign, including focus groups around the country, extensive consultation with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, and the involvement of a panel of top mental health experts. All PSAs direct viewers to the first and only online community exclusive to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, [www.CommunityofVeterans.org](http://www.CommunityofVeterans.org). This innovative website will help veterans connect with one another and link them with comprehensive services, benefits assistance, and mental health resources. A companion PSA campaign launching in 2009 will engage and support the families and loved ones of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. This is the most extensive veterans public outreach by a non-profit in history, and we hope it will provide not only much needed services, but innovation and lessons learned to be shared and replicated by the VA, and DOD.

While we have accomplished landmark successes in 2008, thanks in large part to the work of this Committee, there is still more to do. We are hopeful the new Administration, and the new Congress, will continue to focus on veterans issues. Our 2009 IAVA Legislative Agenda, based on an extensive process of polling and seeking feedback from our 125,000-strong membership, makes recommendations in four areas crucial to today's veterans: Mental Health, Homecoming, Healthcare and Government Accountability.

Attached you will find out complete Legislative Agenda, and the IAVA Legislative Priorities. At this time, I'd like to highlight just a few of the most urgent issues facing Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

**Ensure Thorough, Professional, and Confidential Screening for Invisible Injuries.**

IAVA supports mandatory, face-to-face and confidential mental health and TBI screening by a licensed medical professional, for all servicemembers, before and after their combat tour.

**Advance-Fund Veterans' Health Care.**

The best way to ensure timely funding of veterans' health care is to fully fund the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care budget one year in advance. In addition, IAVA endorses the annual Independent Budget, produced by leading veterans' organizations (including IAVA), as a blueprint for the VA funding levels.

**End the Passive VA System.**

The VA has traditionally been a passive, inward-looking system. Veterans must overcome tremendous bureaucratic obstacles to get the benefits and services that the VA provides. Many veterans do not even know what benefits they are eligible for. The VA must develop a national strategy to promote the use of its services, including advertising VA benefits, expanding VA outreach, and modernizing the VA's online presence.

**Prioritize Veterans in the Economic Stimulus Package.**

Caring for our veterans isn't just the right thing to do - it a sound economic investment. IAVA calls for tax credits for patriotic employers that hire new veterans and reservists, support for veterans struggling with student loans, and investment in shovel-ready projects like repairing veterans' hospitals and cemeteries.

Correctly Implement the New GI Bill.

The historic post-9/11 GI Bill, passed last year, included a provision to allow servicemembers to transfer their GI Bill education funding to a spouse or dependent. But Congress and the Administration can and must keep the bureaucracy moving to make this benefit a reality.

Thank you for your time.