

Paul Rieckhoff, Executive Director & Founder, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

Testimony of Paul Rieckhoff

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Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

“Examining the Lifetime Costs of Supporting the Newest Generation of Veterans”

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Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America’s over 200,000 Member Veterans and supporters, thank you for inviting us to testify on the long-term costs of war for our new generation of vets.

My name is Paul Rieckhoff and I am the Executive Director and Founder of IAVA. I served in Iraq from 2003 to 2004, as an infantry platoon leader in the U.S. Army National Guard. When my unit and I returned home from war, we returned to a country confused by and uncomfortable with its warriors. People wanted to help, they just didn’t know how. Bringing to light the true costs of these wars is part of the reason we formed IAVA in my cramped New York studio apartment in 2004.

We are here to “Examine the Lifetime Costs of a New Generation of Vets.” I’ll start with the bottom line up front, something I learned in the Army – it’s going to be expensive. And it’s going to be complex. But history shows us that it will be less expensive and less complex if we as a nation invest in our veterans now. Investing in these brave men and women now has the added bonus of cultivating a new generation of battle-born leaders, future teachers, doctors, business leaders and maybe even a few members of Congress, that will lead our nation the only way they know how – from the front. The alternative—missing critical investments, shortchanging their benefits and services—will cost our country terribly.

The current condition of new vets’ readjustment into civilian society isn’t pretty. Officially, thirteen-point-three (13.3) percent are unemployed as of this past June, more than 4 percentage points higher than the national average. We see numbers in our membership closer to 20%. In Minnesota the number is 22.9%. In Indiana, 23.6%. And in Michigan, it’s 29.4%. So nationwide, that means approximately 260,000 people in real numbers are out of work—about the same size of the entire Marine Corps. To use a military term, that is un-sat.

Not only are younger veterans at a greater risk of homelessness than the general population, but even when compared to the older veteran population, their risk is higher. Over 11,000 homeless vets officially listed as homeless in 2009 were between the ages of 18 and 30. That’s a full Army Division.

It gets worse. The military and veteran community is also facing a suicide epidemic. In 2010 alone, there were 468 suicides throughout the military. It’s estimated that between 2005 and 2009, 1 service member committed suicide every 36 hours. And more committed suicide in 2010 than died in combat. But that’s just part of the mental health problem, because once individuals separate from the military, it’s impossible to track them unless they enroll in the VA—something only 51 percent of separated OIF and OEF veterans have done.

And these numbers, while bleak, are really just the tip of the iceberg. The legacy of these wars will be cumulative impacts of the multiple deployments, year after year; a burden of many carried by few. Personal issues that are delayed for the needs of a unit can be put off temporarily, for another deployment, but they can't be put off forever. As these wars wind down, the military will likely downsize, just as it has done in all postwar periods. As a result, this new surge of veterans is already returning to local communities nationwide. Those initial months back home are key to the transition process; veterans will either return home to a job opportunity or an unemployment check, either have their own roof over their head or move from shelter to shelter, and either feel included in the community they fought for or feel isolated from it. And our nation will either repeat the mistakes of the way we treated veterans after Vietnam, or it will turn the page. The public, private, and nonprofit sectors must work together to ensure it's the positive return our service members experience—and not the slap in the face of patchwork or non-existent real support.

This committee, and the public sector in general, have done many good things for new veterans returning home. The best example, of course, was the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill in 2008, which has provided close to 500,000 returning service members with educational opportunities they otherwise wouldn't have dreamed of. In 2009, advance funding for VA healthcare was passed into law. In 2010, the Caregivers Bill joined it. And the exciting and urgently needed Hiring Heroes Act, which the Members of this Committee are certainly familiar with, proves that you haven't rested on your laurels this year. This bill can and should be the first jobs bill passed by this Congress.

Creative thinking for these complex issues is being used off of Capitol Hill, too. Veterans' courts are a great example. Designed to try cases of non-violent offenses and to deal with the invisible wounds of war, over 59 courts have been established since 2008, spanning at least 24 states. As part of the sentencing process, veterans in these courts agree to appropriate treatment that can include mentoring sessions and counseling. And it works. Big time. Of the veterans enrolled in the first year of the original veterans' court in Buffalo, New York, roughly 90 percent successfully finished it and none have committed any more crimes.

But legislation and government can only do so much. The private sector must do its part, too. Companies will need to play a huge role in the hiring of new vets. That can't happen in a meaningful way until civilian employers better understand how military service and skill-sets translate into the civilian sector – something 60 percent of human resource managers said was a challenge. The civilian and military divide is very much alive, and it's a shame. Companies that commit to hiring veterans will find it's not charity. It's a smart investment. Vets are entrepreneurial by nature; although they represent less than 1 percent of Americans, 9 percent of American firms are veteran-owned. And yet the unemployment numbers for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans continue to rise. If folks really want to support troops, they should hire them - something some companies and organizations have already realized. For example, IAVA has been proud to partner with leaders like Google, J.C. Penney, CBRE, Schwab and the Chamber of Commerce, in efforts to turn the tide on vet unemployment.

Jobs are the horse that drives this cart of solutions. The U.S. Government invested hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars and training in these men and women for war. Many have

specific skills that relate directly to civilian trades, such as logistics and operations, communications, medicine, and engineering. And they have worked in teams with a mission-focused approach, and in dynamic, high-stakes environments that require flexibility and adaptation. They are entrepreneurial. They are innovative. And they are tough. As a society with an all-volunteer force, and one trying to invigorate our economy, we have an obligation (and an opportunity) to seek out these incredibly valuable civic assets, and engage and empower them in our domestic workforce. They've had our back overseas. When times were tough, they delivered for America. And they can do it again back home.

These aren't just government problems, or business problems, or nonprofit problems. They are American problems. Take the experience of Army Specialist Nick Colgin. While serving in Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division as a combat medic, Colgin proved himself over and over again. He saved the life of a French soldier that was shot in the head. His quick decision-making also led to 42 locals being rescued from a flooding river, and he was ultimately awarded the Bronze Star for his actions over the course of his deployment. He also suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury due to an RPG-attack on his convoy.

Colgin was discharged honorably from the Army two months after he returned from war. He was unable to find a job anywhere in the medical field. He was looking to work as a first responder in Wyoming, which was the equivalent of what he did overseas, but employers said he lacked the proper credentials and certificates. While waiting for many months for the VA to process his disability claim, he was forced to collect unemployment to make ends meet. He readily admits to having serious readjustment issues, something brought on by a sense of isolation, a lack of daily purpose like he found in the military, and a lack of structural support for new vets in his community.

But Colgin got things turned around. While the private sector failed him, the public sector did eventually process his disability claim (but after he waited for six months). He also got linked up with nonprofits like ours and the Wounded Warrior Project, where, on a fishing trip, he came face-to-face with veterans "like him" for the first time. This had a very positive effect on him, he said, as he realized that it was okay that the war had changed him. He eventually got the right paperwork to be a first responder, after using some of his New G.I. Bill benefits, and will begin his senior year at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in the fall. Not all new veterans have the happy ending of a Nick Colgin, though. It's important to remember that those numbers I referenced earlier are living, breathing people just like Nick, or anyone at this testimony, with hopes and dreams and ambitions of their own. And every single one will have a cost. But every single one is worth it.

Folks, we are at a crossroads in terms of veterans care. We can turn to history for some guidance on what to do and what not to do. World War II veterans returned to a nation fully engaged and invested in the war effort. Ticker-tape parades occurred across the country to celebrate the vets' victories in Europe and the Pacific. VA loans for homes and farms were made available at low interest rates. Approximately 50 percent of the "Greatest Generation" of veterans used their educational benefits provided by the original G.I. Bill. All of this played a huge role in the economic prosperity of the post-World War II years.

Compare that, then, to Vietnam. Instead of returning to parades celebrating their sacrifices, they came home one by one in the middle of the night, all too often hiding their uniforms and crew cuts. The struggles to transition back home didn't end there. Long after the end of that war, in the 1980s, Vietnam vets earned about 15 percent less than their civilian counterparts. And even as late as 1991, they made up 49 percent of the veteran inmate population. While factors like these did lead to the formation of some wonderful nonprofit organizations, like our friends at Vietnam Veterans of America, the overall contrast of their experience with that of the World War II generation couldn't be more evident. They deserved better. And they've fought to ensure guys like me have gotten it. But we still have a long way to go.

Which brings us to today, when a new group of 2.3 million combat-tested veterans return home from their own battles abroad. American society has finally learned to separate politics from the warrior. There's a "sea of goodwill" for the returning vet, which is a great thing. But now comes a harder task – tapping into that sea, channeling it, directing it into supporting the troops in a meaningful, lasting way. Into more than just yellow ribbons and care packages.

Long term, it's estimated that it'll cost between \$600 billion and \$1 trillion to care for them alone. Those are imposing numbers, to be sure, especially in this time of an economic recession and spiraling debt. But those numbers will only increase with time if we slash veteran program funding in a shortsighted rush.

But of course paying the bills is only a part of the solution. In 2010, the U.S. government spent \$57.5 billion on veterans' benefits. The government programs that used that money can only ask the following question: was that money spent as efficiently and deliberately as possible? As these vets learned trying to rebuild villages and cities in Iraq in Afghanistan, money itself is a weapons system. But it's a precision weapon, not an area weapon, and we'd all be wise to remember that as we go forward.

The Department of Defense has recently explored various "resiliency models" for its service members and families, most notably the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program. The stated goal of this program is to "master the skills necessary to achieve balance in their lives and build resilience in order to thrive in an era of high operational tempo and persistent conflict." This is a great example of the military's can-do spirit and something that can be – and should be – applied to their lives after they leave the military. But the right tools and training need to be available for that to happen. It's a tough world out there right now, for everyone, vets and civilians alike. But this country will bounce back, just like it always has in times of difficulty. And it will be the military veterans that lead the way. The stage is set for the Next Greatest Generation - the Innovation Generation - if, during this formative time in their lives, the proper resources are provided for them to reach their full potential. Investing in Iraq and Afghanistan veterans now saves us money in the future and plants the seeds for continued national prosperity. We are at the crossroads. Now, where do we go? Will we make the easy turn and slash veteran program funding, or the hard turn, and invest in the future?

The costs are clear. And they are tremendous. But so is the sacrifice these men and women have made for our nation. And so is the potential for return. Before I deployed to Iraq, I worked on Wall Street for a bit. And if were analyzing the potential for return on this investment, my

generation of veterans would get a “strong buy” rating. Investing in the Innovation Generation is like buying shares of Apple stock in 1980.

In some ways, the battles on the homefront will be more challenging than those fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. If there were an easy way to reincorporate the 1 percent into the other 99 percent, someone would’ve done it by now. But that doesn’t make it impossible. We’re up to the challenge, America has done it before. But it’s going to take everyone, from Capitol Hill to Wall Street to Main Street, to make it happen.

The upside is huge. And the time is now. And we are the closest thing you’ll ever have to a sure thing in this town. On behalf of our generation of veterans around the world, I am here to tell you to put your money on the table. We are worth it. We will deliver. We won’t let America down. We never have and we never will.

Just watch.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.