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U.S. HOUSE AND SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEES  
“LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION”

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TESTIMONY OF TOM TARANTINO  
LEGISLATIVE ASSOCIATE

Mr. Chairmen, Ranking Members, and members of both committees, thank you for inviting Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) to present our legislative priorities for 2010. We especially appreciate the opportunity to bat clean-up, closing off the 18 different legislative presentations in just two weeks time.

On behalf of our 180,000 members and supporters, we would like to thank both committees for your unwavering commitment to our nation’s veterans. Every year we have come to this committee with our most pressing issues and you have stepped up in a historic and unprecedented way. You were instrumental in the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, advance appropriations, record VA budget increases and even mandatory, person-to-person mental health screenings for every returning servicemember. Thank you.

As an OIF veteran, with 10 years of service in the Army, I have seen first hand the difficulties that many veterans face when transitioning from service member to veteran. There is the wounded warrior, torn from service due to their extraordinary sacrifice dealing with physical and mental health injuries. And there is the young veteran who spent most of their formative years in uniform. For both the transition can be difficult and often feels impossible. It is because of these veterans that last year, when IAVA presented our legislative priorities, we asked a simple question: “Are we ready for the surge of veterans coming home?”

Unfortunately, with record high suicide rates within the military, hundreds of thousands of veterans desperately waiting for their earned VA benefits and skyrocketing veteran unemployment, the answer in spite of everything we have already done is still “no.” Once again we are coming to this committee with a blueprint for addressing these problems head on.

These recommendations include the call to: modernize the VA claims processing system; secure jobs for our nation’s heroes, streamline and simplify the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and support better care for female veterans.

We are ready to work with you to fundamentally change the way America cares for its veterans. “The VA disability process was more painful than some of my injuries.”

-IAVA member

**MODERNIZE THE VA CLAIMS PROCESSING SYSTEM.** We hear the calls of our members and stand shoulder to shoulder with our fellow veteran service organizations in saying that “Modernizing the VA Claims Processing System” is the most critical priority for the VA and this committee in 2010. DAV National Commander, Bobby Barrera, led it off when he said, “A core mission of the VA is to provide benefits to relieve the economic effects of disability on veterans and their families. [The] VA must properly deliver them to veterans. Protracted delays in

providing these benefits mean disabled veterans and their families suffer hardships. Protracted delays can lead to deprivation, bankruptcies, and homelessness.”

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are receiving benefits under a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability system that was outdated years before most of them were born. The antiquated system, which focuses on quantity over quality, leads to frequent errors, countless bureaucratic red tape, and a lengthy wait for benefits. With the VA benefits backlog nearing 1 million claims, IAVA recommends a modern claims processing system that digitizes records, holds processors accountable for the accuracy of their work, and removes unnecessary steps in the evaluation process.

“They told me just to keep waiting for my GI Bill.”

-IAVA member

**STREAMLINE AND SIMPLIFY THE POST-9/11 GI BILL.** The new GI Bill is the greatest investment in veterans and their families since World War II. However, a significant number of veterans have been short-changed. Additionally, many veterans who have tried to use their benefits have been left waiting for checks, as they struggle to pay their living and scholastic expenses. IAVA proposes upgrades to the new GI Bill that will streamline VA processing times by pruning bureaucratic steps and providing all veterans a generous and equitable benefit.

“I was laid-off after my third activation/deployment ... My employer just had enough.”

-IAVA member

**SECURE JOBS FOR OUR NATION’S HEROES.** In the last year, the unemployment rate of new veterans has nearly doubled, and employers are growing increasingly weary of hiring or reemploying National Guardsmen and Reservists who have been mobilized at unprecedented rates. Congress must help veterans find gainful employment by leveraging federal contracting rules, supporting veteran entrepreneurship and providing tax credits to employers who hire new veterans.

“Since my return, I have lost 2 close friends to suicide, 2... I said 2, from my platoon. That is the sick reality.”

-IAVA member

**ELIMINATE COMBAT STRESS STIGMA.** More servicemembers were killed by their own hands last year than by combat in Iraq. One of the largest obstacles that servicemembers must overcome before seeking help is the heavy stigma associated with mental health injuries. IAVA recommends declaring war on this dangerous stigma by launching a well-funded, researched and integrated nationwide campaign to promote the use of the Department of Defense and VA services such as Vet Centers and the Suicide Prevention hotline.

“The quality of care for a female at a VA hospital is very low.”

-IAVA member

**SUPPORT BETTER HEALTH CARE FOR FEMALE VETERANS.** Women veterans have shown enormous dedication and courage in defending their country. But too often, they do not receive the same level of support, within the military and the VA, as their male counterparts. IAVA recommends bold steps to improve military and VA health care and benefits for women warriors, transitional services to reduce staggering rates of homelessness, and significant expansion of resources to those coping with Military Sexual Trauma (MST).

## I. Modernize the VA Disability Claims Process

Disabled veterans and survivors should be able to apply for benefits through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based process that enables VA to reach accurate decisions within acceptable time frames.

Active Duty Servicemembers should be able to apply for benefits before discharge through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based system that arrives at accurate decisions by the time of their discharge.

It's long past time to bring our benefits system into the 21st Century. With the VA benefits backlog climbing ever higher, the need for transformation has never been greater. With the surge of veterans coming home, there is no time to loose. VA must immediately modernize their claims processing system by digitizing records, holding processors accountable for the accuracy of their work, and removing unnecessary steps in the evaluation process.

In 2010, IAVA would like to see a new benefits approval process put in to motion. We applaud many of the efforts already underway with in the VA. However, any reforms to the system must achieve the following goals:

- **Develop a Simpler and More Transparent Process:** A universal and simple application process that provides veterans with regular updates on the progress of their claims and allows them to access their records and the status of their claims.
- **Shift the Work Culture from Production to Quality:** A work culture that measures and rewards quality (in a timely manner) of results more than quantity, and provides the training and education of VBA's management and workforce necessary for achieving that outcome.
- **Modernize the IT Infrastructure and Management:** A secure and accessible paperless IT system that rapidly moves and organizes information necessary for VA to approve claims for benefits, while optimizing workflow and business processes.

The greatest obstacle to the VA's modernization of benefits delivery is their archaic IT system, which cannot exchange electronic health records between DOD and VA and does not allow veterans to track the processing of their benefits claims. The DOD still relies on a paper-based system for military service record and as troops transition from the DOD to the VA, medical records and military service records regularly get lost in the shuffle. Hundreds of thousands of wounded troops and veterans are forced to wait months, and sometimes years, for disability compensation because of these IT deficiencies. VA and DoD have been working on the ability to seamlessly share veterans' health records for over a decade, but progress has been slow and transparency limited. A decade is too long. In the last decade: Google gave us the capacity to search the world; Facebook revolutionized friendships; and from my phone I can access my bank records, email my friends serving in Afghanistan, and tweet this hearing.

In April 2009, the Administration announced a bold initiative to create the Joint Lifetime Virtual Electronic Record (JLVER), integrating health and service data into a format usable by DOD, VA and the private sector. If successful, benefits processing time will be cut by months and veterans will receive higher quality health care across the board. A project of this magnitude is

something in our world akin to landing a man on the moon. It should be given all the resources and attention necessary to ensure success.

Like advance appropriations and the new GI Bill, modernizing the VA disability claims process will require a truly collaborative effort on all our parts.

## II. Streamline and Simplify the Post 9/11 GI Bill

IAVA is glad to partner with The Military Coalition (TMC) and many of our fellow veterans groups and recommend the following four essential upgrades to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. These upgrades must be put into effect without delay:

- Fully cover tuition and fees at any public undergraduate school, while setting a national baseline for the Yellow Ribbon program for private and graduate schools.
- Authorize Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits for Title 32 Active Guard Reserve (AGRs).
- Grant Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to veterans who enroll in vocational programs, apprenticeships and On The Job training (OJT).
- Provide a living allowance for full-time distance learners based on the zip code in which the veteran lives.

These proposed upgrades will reduce VA processing times by pruning unnecessary bureaucratic steps and will allow many veterans access to this generous benefit, which they have rightfully earned.

### Tuition Benefit is Too Difficult to Administer Properly

The current method of determining tuition/fees benefits is confusing, unpredictable, inequitable and difficult to administer.

- Confusing: Splitting reimbursement rates for tuition and fees is unprecedented & causes widespread confusion and unrealistic expectations of what the new GI bill will cover.
- Unpredictable: Tuition caps have changed 587% since last year making it impossible for a veteran or a school to predict from year to year what the Post 9/11 GI Bill will pay.
- Inequitable: Caps bear no rational relation to the actual cost of education in each state, Tuition (per credit): \$93 (SD)  \$1,471 (TX) Fees (per term): \$523 (DE)  \$63,576 (UT).
- Difficult to Administer: Identifying the most expensive state program is a laborious and subjective process. VA updated the caps 7 times this year requiring reworking of claims.

By fully covering tuition and fees at all public undergraduate schools and setting a national baseline for the Yellow Ribbon program for private and graduate schools we will abolish the messy state by state cap system and replace it with a simple, generous and equitable benefit. This simple promise to pay for public schools will get the VA out of the business of playing hide and seek with each state's most expensive public school programs each year and will give veterans the predictability to make sound decisions on what college they can afford to attend year to year.

### Full Time National Guard Servicemembers Left Behind

National Guard members, serving on full-time active duty in the Active Guard and Reserve program (AGR), are the only cohort of currently serving members excluded from Chapter 33 eligibility. Moreover, their counterparts in the Federal Reserve forces AGR program are eligible for Chapter 33. Last year there were almost 30,000 Army National Guard and 13,500 Air National Guard servicemembers serving on Title 32 active duty orders. Guard AGRs are responsible for supporting homeland security missions and preparing Guard formations for

operational deployments. In order to correct this oversight IAVA urges Congress to pass legislation that extends eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill to servicemembers who are serving full time active duty under Title 32 orders.

#### Vocational Student Denied Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits

The WWII GI Bill sent over 8 million veterans to school; many did not seek college degrees. Instead, they participated in vocational and apprenticeship training programs. Unfortunately, modern veterans, nearly 16,000 of who are pursuing vocational training, will not be able to access the new GI Bill. Oddly, veterans can pursue vocational certificate programs just not at a vocational school. Non-degree granting schools, or vocational schools, are specifically excluded from the new GI Bill and no provision was made for Apprenticeship and On The Job training (OJT) programs. Both types of programs were covered under the old GI Bill. Veterans and America's industries benefitted greatly.

Veterans pursuing a vocational program should not be penalized for going to a non-traditional school. We believe that veterans attending vocational schools should be entitled to the same Post-9/11 type benefits as a veteran attending a vocational program at a community college. We also believe that veterans in apprenticeship and OJT program deserve a benefit under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. To maintain the intent of this historic legislation, IAVA urges Congress to abolish the institution of higher education requirement under the Post-9/11 GI Bill and grant Post-9/11 benefits for vocational, OTJ and apprenticeship programs.

#### Online Students Penalized Under the New GI Bill

Veterans attempting to earn a degree through distance learning should be entitled to the same benefits as veterans attending traditional brick and mortar institutions. Currently these veterans do not qualify for a living allowance, unless they take at least one course "in residence." One brick and mortar class qualifies the student for the full living allowance. The "in residence" requirement was simply a way of determining the proper living allowance rate, based on the zip code of the school. It should not be taken as a critique on distance learning.

Distance learning is a highly popular form of education for veterans. This unfair distinction must be rectified. IAVA acknowledges that a different process of determining housing allowance rates must be employed for distance learners. We recommend basing the housing allowance for distance learning on the zip code of the veteran's residence or establishing a national rate for the distance learning living allowance.

### III. Secure Jobs for Our Nation's Heroes

Troops are facing serious challenges returning to the civilian workforce. Among Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans of the active-duty military the unemployment rate is 13.8%. This is about 4% higher than their civilian peers. More than 1 in 5 "young male veterans," usually from the lower enlisted ranks, are currently unemployed. In addition, National Guardsmen and Reservists, "citizen soldiers" who leave behind their civilian lives, to serve alongside active-duty troops, are inadequately protected against job discrimination.

In the most severe cases, economic hardship can push veterans into homelessness. Foreclosure rates in military towns are increasing at four times the national average. Almost 2,000 Iraq and

Afghanistan veterans have already been seen in the Department of Veterans Affairs' homeless outreach program. Given the state of the economy, the problem is likely to worsen in the coming years.

IAVA believes that meaningful employment after leaving service begins while still in uniform. The DOD must understand its responsibility to its servicemembers to set them up for success, whether they retire from service or choose to leave. The military is a lifestyle, not a job. Those that choose this lifestyle must be afforded every opportunity to excel while in uniform and when they put the uniform away. Transitional Assistance programs must be uniform and mandatory; providing meaningful training for the cultural shift one will face when entering the civilian world.

While the benefits of a military career are obvious to all present today, as a nation we fall short when translating those skills to the private sector. A combat medic, with years of battlefield medical experience, can perform amazing feats of care, far beyond what is expected of their civilian peers. However, when transferring to a civilian medical career, they often find that the practical skills they honed on the battlefield do not translate into marketable vocational experience. The DOD and Department of Labor must embark on a comprehensive review of practical military skills and develop a program to transfer those skills into marketable certifications.

A nation at war must call upon all its citizens to do their part, and many large and small businesses answer this call. The government can and should provide assistance to businesses who choose to invest in our nations' heroes. We should reward patriotic employers with tax credits when their reserve component employees are called to active-duty for over 90 days. Similarly, we should support employers who continue to support their employees by paying the difference between the service members' civilian salary and their military wages. This tax credit should also be available to businesses that provide additional training, for returning reservists and guard members, to bring these veterans up to same level of training as their non-deployed peers. Additionally, we should extend the tax credits to businesses that incentivize hiring veterans. And we should make these incentives permanent.

For our business leaders who are also leaders on the battlefield we should mitigate the effect of frequent and lengthy deployments by providing small businesses owners in the National Guard and Reserves with additional access to capital, insurance, and bonding via the VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise. To achieve this goal, the Center for Veterans Enterprise should receive appropriate funding and resources.

#### IV. Eliminate Combat Stress Stigma

IAVA is pleased to see that the President's VA budget submission has allocated \$5.2 billion toward the treatment of hidden injuries such as PTSD and TBI. This is an 8.5% increase over last year's budget. This funding is critically needed to start preparing for the surge home of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. We are grateful for this dramatic investment, but we believe the VA must make a serious commitment to remove the stigma around seeking help for mental health injuries, prioritize VA outreach, and ensure access to top quality mental health care.

Exacerbating the problem of inadequate treatment is the heavy stigma associated with receiving mental health care. More than half of soldiers and Marines in Iraq, who test positive for a psychological injury, report concerns that they will be seen as weak by their fellow servicemembers. One in three of these troops worry about the effect of a mental health diagnosis on their career. As a result, those most in need of treatment, may never seek it.

To end the suicide epidemic and forever eliminate combat stress stigma the VA and DOD must declare war on this dangerous stigma. They must launch a nationwide campaign to combat stigma and to promote the use of DOD and VA services such as Vet Centers and the Suicide Prevention hotline.

This campaign must be well funded, research-tested and able to integrate key stakeholders like Veterans Service Organizations and community-based non-profits. Furthermore, the VA should develop and broadly disseminate combat stress injury training programs for civilian behavioral health professionals, who treat veterans outside of the VA (e.g., college counselors, rural providers, behavioral health graduate students and professional associations).

We believe that VA must allocate specific resources toward battling this dangerous stigma or we will never see the critical mass of veterans coming in to seek help.

For our part, IAVA has embarked upon a multi-year multi-media campaign, in partnership with the Ad Council, aimed at eradicating the stigma associated with mental health injuries and seeking care. This historic campaign reaches out to veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and their families across traditional and new media. Centered around Community of Veterans, a social network for OIF and OEF veterans, the campaign seeks to reach out to the 1% of Americans who have fought in these wars and show them that their country, their families, their friends, and their peers have their backs. We have learned a lot from this incredibly successful campaign. We welcome the opportunity to share our expertise and best practices with you and the VA.

#### V. Support Better Care for Female Veterans

The VA must work to close gaps in care for women warriors. The VA has made strides in recent years, but they are still underprepared to provide adequate care to the surge of female veterans coming to its hospitals and clinics. Women veterans are the fastest growing segment of the veteran population. Their enrollment in the VA is expected to more than double in the next 15 years. Women veterans still face several barriers when seeking care at the VA, including: fragmentation of services, health care and service providers with poor understanding of unique women's health issues, lack of knowledge regarding eligibility for benefits, an unwelcoming VA culture, inadequate privacy and safety practices at facilities, and no access to childcare. A vast majority of these women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are of childbearing age. Responding to these patients will require a shift in how the VA has traditionally provided care to female veterans. Congress must finish the job it began last year and send the veterans health care omnibus bill to the President's desk.

#### Conclusion

Caring for the men and women who defend freedom is a solemn responsibility that belongs to lawmakers, veterans and citizens alike. IAVA believes that in the past several years we have seen a turning point in the way we care and provide for our nation's warriors. However, despite critical successes and positive moves towards a system that honors their service and sacrifice we must remain ever vigilant and continue to show them that we have their backs. Thank you for your time and attention.