

Tom Tarantino, Deputy Policy Director, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

Testimony of Tom Tarantino

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Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Burr and members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America's 200,000 member veterans and supporters, thank you for inviting me to testify on the President's FY 2013 budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

My name is Tom Tarantino and I am the Deputy Policy Director for IAVA. I proudly served 10 years in the Army, beginning my career as an enlisted Reservist, and leaving service as an Active Duty Cavalry Officer. Throughout these 10 years, my single most important duty was to take care of other soldiers. In the military, they teach us to have each other's backs, both on and off the field of battle. And although my uniform is now a suit and tie, I am proud to work with this Congress to continue to have the backs of America's service members and veterans.

IAVA is the largest veterans group dedicated to speaking for the nearly 2.4 million veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn. At IAVA, we tell veterans "We've got your back," a military saying meaning: "We'll support you no matter what." We hope that Congress shares this sentiment and passes a VA budget that will not only tell but also show veterans that "Congress has your back."

While IAVA is pleased with the administration's recognition that the VA needs increased resources to adequately care for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, we believe that VA health care must be fully funded to the level recommended in the 2013 Independent Budget (IB)-- \$57.2 billion. Even though the proposed VA budget shows a 4.5% increase over 2012 (\$52.7 billion), that is still more than \$4 billion less than what the Independent Budget recommends.

IAVA is also deeply concerned that Congress has not passed a regular budget on time in years. Fortunately, Congress has maintained VA funding (both current and advance) in various continuing resolutions (CR) and ad-hoc appropriations bills. However, WE ARE concerned that if the CR process continues, then the security that advance funding is meant to provide for VA health care may erode. Advance funding was intended to provide security for the VA health care system when Congress was late passing a budget. That security is increasingly irrelevant if years pass without a budget at all. The budget crisis during the summer of 2011 highlighted the need to ensure that the VA is funded in advance and that the process is immune to political infighting. I was encouraged that last year both the House and Senate came up with solid VA appropriations bills when other bills never made it off the drawing board. Nonetheless, it proved disappointing that despite the bipartisan cooperation demonstrated to put those bills together, they never made it to the President's desk for signature. Our nation has made a covenant with its service members and veterans, many of who have sacrificed pieces of themselves in service to our country. When political concerns and dangerous brinkmanship threaten the VA, the impact falls on those service

members and veterans who can least afford to bear the burden. IAVA stands with the VSO community in urging Congress and the Administration, in the strongest possible terms, to ensure that the VA continues to be fully funded and funded in advance.

We are at a critical juncture for both service members and veterans. As the Department of Defense budget shrinks, threatening earned benefits like retirement and TRICARE, and the active duty and reserve components plan to shed over 90,000 service members, the burden on the VA system will only increase. Failing to fully fund the VA or appropriate the budget in advance will inflict pain and hardship on thousands of veterans.

Education

Among the most useful programs administered by the VA are its educational programs. More than 700,000 veterans and their family members have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill to further their education, increase job skills, and secure their employability. But one of the single greatest threats to the success and future of the GI Bill is the lack of useful metrics and the subsequent inability of the VA and State Approving Agencies (SAA) to prevent fraud, particularly in the realm of for-profit schools. IAVA recognizes that the majority of for-profit schools are honest actors and that they provide an invaluable resource for many military members and veterans who do not wish pursue a traditional education. However, as pointed out in the IB, for-profits received more than a third of GI Bill funds while accounting for less than a third of GI Bill graduates in 2009. Additionally, GI Bill users are pursuing education at for-profits in large numbers. Out of the top ten institutions receiving GI Bill money, eight are for-profits. By and large, IAVA believes this industry is not producing a return proportional to the benefits being spent.

IAVA believes that a three-pronged approach to the problem is necessary to solve this problem:

1. We must collect useful data on both student and institutional success. Without mandatory, uniform data collection across the board, we will never be able to give student veterans the tools to make educational choices that meet their needs.
2. We need clear, comprehensible, and easily accessible consumer education. Having data on schools is useless unless we can present it to students in a manner that they can digest. This should include both online methods of comparing schools as well as a commitment to increase educational counseling for veterans.
3. We must ensure that the marketplace can weed out poorly performing schools by changing the 90-10 rule to include and classify DoD and VA benefits as government funds.

One of the biggest obstacles to veterans and service members educating themselves and making informed decisions about the use of their benefits is the lack of meaningful and consistent data presented in an easily accessible and digestible format. The first step toward addressing this problem is to collect meaningful and consistent data that can be used to compare program outcomes across a variety of education, trade and credentialing programs. Metrics should be similar to those collected by the Department of Education (DoE) for institutions that receive Title IV funding.

Expanding the VetSuccess program, re-engineering the Transition Assistance Program (TAP),

and expanding VA educational counseling services are quick but substantial ways to improve consumer education. IAVA commends the VA for expanding the VetSuccess program from 8 to 80 campuses and recommends an even more aggressive expansion. The VA has shown that VetSuccess is working and our conversations with students and university administrators have borne out the VA's assessment. The program is currently funded for \$18 million. IAVA recommends dramatically increasing this figure. Even at \$50 million we are spending less than 0.007% out of the \$7.2 billion we spend annually on the GI Bill to ensure that these benefits are used wisely. This sum will ultimately be far less than the potential billions in taxpayer dollars wasted on educational programs that do not provide the services that they advertise. Along with the improvements made to TAP as part of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, we must also create a track for veterans who are choosing to go to school rather than directly in to the workforce. These veterans should be able to take advantage of VA vocational counseling/education that is currently available to all veterans using VA education benefits. Right now, a veteran can choose to opt-in to VA educational counseling. Very few actually do. IAVA believes that this should be offered to all veterans, allowing them to opt out if they choose to.

IAVA is also concerned with how the government supports the State Approving Agencies (SAA). We must reform and clarify the responsibilities of the SAAs, in order to ensure that their efforts are targeted and effective. We rely on the SAAs to help ensure quality and compliance in all states and territories; yet, we give them only \$19 million per year to do this. This small amount spent to ensure that public funds are well used is penny wise and pound-foolish. At the current level of funding, each state receives an average of \$380,000 to perform an extremely broad range of work-intensive tasks across hundreds of campuses statewide. As with the VetSuccess program, spending a fraction of a percent to make sure that billions are well spent is pound-wise.

All of this must be executed with one goal in mind: preserve the GI Bill. Preserving the integrity of the GI Bill should be a top priority for every lawmaker on Capitol Hill. The benefit not only provides upward economic mobility for the individuals who participate, but it benefits their entire communities and the nation as a whole in the long run. The original Post-World War II GI Bill, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, returned \$7 dollars in taxes and economic output for every \$1 that was spent on the program. Like the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the program was threatened early on by unscrupulous actors and predators whose sole reason for existence was to separate veterans from the benefit they had (literally) fought so hard to receive. Today, nearly a third of all those who are eligible to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill have used it, and many have passed on the benefit to their children or spouses. Further education, combined with the discipline, technical skills, maturity, and knowledge that America's fighting men and women have developed through their service, will deliver greater return for our country. The Post-9/11 GI Bill has the potential to be the engine of future economic growth, or at least one of the key components for securing our economic future.

Suicide and Mental Health

Sadly, suicide has become a major issue for service members and veterans. Army suicide rates continue to trend upward; DoD-wide data is not consistent or regularly reported and therefore harder to track. Meanwhile, the VA estimated that in 2009 18 veterans took their own lives each day. The VA also does not consistently share its data on veteran suicide. In addition, it does not

generally account for the almost half (about 1.1 million) of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who have never set foot in a VA hospital. We will never be able to get a handle on this epidemic until we can, at the very least, determine its scope. To do so, IAVA recommends expanding the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Violent Death Reporting System to all 50 states. Once we can accurately collect data on veteran suicide, we can more efficiently target resources and develop programs to combat the problem. Like the GI Bill, we can make reasonable investments upfront to ensure that the resources we expend later on are more effective, efficient, and saves lives.

A critical step to understanding how we can stop veteran and service members suicides is to understand that suicide itself is not the whole issue. Suicide is the tragic conclusion of the failure to address the spectrum of challenges returning veterans face. These challenges are not just mental health injuries; they include challenges of finding employment, reintegrating to family and community life, dealing with health care and benefits bureaucracy, and many other issues. Fighting suicide is not just about preventing the act of suicide. It's about providing a "soft and productive landing" for our veterans when they return home.

A 2011 RAND survey of veterans in New York State revealed that many veterans face difficulty navigating the complex systems of benefits and services available to them. While this survey was specific to New York veterans, the results are indicative of veterans' experiences nationwide. Veterans reported that they do not know how to find the services they need or apply for the benefits they have earned. Even when they are able to find services appropriate for their needs, many veterans report frustration in accessing these services. Some veterans report long waiting periods to get an appointment at the VA, while others report having to repeat their stories and experiences to a number of different providers. These delays and lack of continuity do not help veterans already suffering from mental health issues. Additionally, the RAND survey revealed that the difficulty in accessing services is not limited to the VA. Most respondents could not identify a state agency or non-profit that provided direct mental health services.

To complicate the bureaucracy, we also know that many veterans are not seeking care because of the stigma attached to mental health injuries. Multiple studies confirm that veterans are concerned about how seeking care could impact their careers, both in and out of the military. These concerns include the effect on their ability to get security clearances and how co-workers and supervisors would perceive them. It is critical that we continue to work to reduce this stigma.

To combat this, IAVA recommends that the VA and DoD partner with experts in the private and nonprofit sector to develop a robust and aggressive outreach campaign to veterans. This campaign should focus on directing veterans to services such as Vet Centers, as well as state and local community-based services. The broader campaign should be integrated into local initiatives like San Francisco's 311 Veterans portal. Most importantly, the campaign should be well funded and reflect the best practices and expertise of experts in both the mental health and advertising fields. For our part, IAVA has partnered with the Ad Council to launch a public service awareness campaign that is focused on the mental health and invisible injuries confronting veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. A key component of the campaign has focused on reducing the stigma of seeking mental health care. We are happy to share our best practices from this campaign to aid in a national effort.

Employment

America's newest veterans also face a tough economy and serious employment challenges. In 2011, the average unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was a staggering 12.1 percent, leaving an average of 234,000 combat veterans struggling to find gainful employment after their service in the most severe economic situation in decades.

Finding a job as a returning veteran is hard, but finding quality employment is even harder. Today, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans leaving the active duty military are faced with civilian employers who do not understand the value of their skills and military experience. According to a 2010 survey, 60 percent of employers do not believe they have "a complete understanding of the qualifications ex-service members offer." National Guardsmen and Reservists who leave behind their civilian lives to serve alongside active duty troops are also inadequately protected against job discrimination. Additionally, separated service members with college degrees earn on average almost \$10,000 less per year than their non-veteran counterparts. Historical trends show this wage gap could continue for decades; Vietnam veterans earned significantly less than their civilian peers until they reached their fifties.

In 2011, Congress took bold action to stem the tide of rising veteran unemployment. By passing the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, you will ensure that veterans military skills will be translated into their equivalent civilian skills, veterans will have the resources to retrain themselves in to new markets, and that employers will hire more veterans. This bill is a huge step forward and we thank you for spearheading it. IAVA stands ready to assist Congress to effectively and efficiently implement this new law in 2012.

But many of the provisions of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act will rely heavily on the ability of the Department of Labor (DoL) Veterans Employment and Training (VETS) program to transform outdated and inefficient services. I am concerned that the proposed budget for DoL VETS seems to be reduced by \$5 million in FY 2013. This is, frankly, unacceptable. What is even more unacceptable is that while the programs that we are updating come out of this committee's scope and jurisdiction, the funding and accountability for these programs is nowhere near the reach of either veterans affairs or veterans appropriations subcommittees. This is not a recipe for success. Perhaps it is time that we reevaluate where the VETS program should live. IAVA believes that the VA is a more suitable agency for the VETS program, if for no other reason than that is where veteran will go if they need veterans' services. It is time that we match services with the expectations of their customers.

Conclusion

Caring for the men and women who defend freedom is a solemn responsibility that belongs to lawmakers, business leaders, and everyday citizens alike. In the past several years we have seen a turning point in the way we care and provide for our nation's warriors. Despite critical successes, however, veterans' education, mental health, employment, and advance healthcare funding are not up to standard. We must remain ever vigilant and continue to show the men and women who volunteer to serve their country that we have their backs. Thank you for your time and attention.