

Tom Tarantino, Senior Legislative Associate, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

Testimony of Tom Tarantino
Senior Legislative Associate
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Joint Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees
Legislative Priorities of IAVA for 2011
March 16, 2011

Madam Chairwoman, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members, and members of both committees, thank you for inviting Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) to present our legislative priorities for 2011.

On behalf of our 200,000 Member Veterans and supporters, we would like to thank both committees for your commitment to our nation's veterans. Every year we have come before these committees with our most pressing issues, and in response you have stepped up in historic and unprecedented ways for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. In the last several years, you were instrumental in the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, advance appropriations, record VA budget increases, mandatory face-to-face mental health screenings for every returning servicemember, and most recently upgrades to the New GI Bill that expanded benefits to over 400,000 service members and veterans. Thank you.

As an Iraq veteran, with 10 years of service in the Army, I have seen first hand the difficulties that many veterans face when transitioning from active duty service member to veteran. I have seen wounded warriors, who have made extraordinary sacrifices on the frontline, return home with physical and mental health injuries. I've also seen young veterans, who spent most of their formative years in uniform, struggle to find jobs after leaving the service. For both, the transition is difficult and seemingly impossible. It is for these veterans and the millions who support them that each year IAVA asks: "Is our country prepared to build and support the Next Greatest Generation?"

Unfortunately, with skyrocketing veteran unemployment, record high suicide rates and hundreds of thousands of veterans desperately waiting for their earned VA benefits, we are far from being able to answer "yes." But we are confident we can do it and we present these committees a blueprint for addressing these issues head on to ensure every veteran has unwavering support for the transition home.

We are ready to work with you to fundamentally change the way America cares for its veterans and to build the Next Greatest Generation. This year, we believe Congress must focus on the following five priorities to do so:

1. Employ the Next Greatest Generation
2. Prevent suicide among troops and veterans
3. Reduce the VA claims backlog
4. Improve care for female veterans
5. Ease the transition home by fully funding the VA

I. EMPLOY THE NEXT GREATEST GENERATION

Over 17% of IAVA members surveyed were unemployed in 2010.

“Since my resume reads like a war novel, very few employers will give opportunities for employment. You have to take what you can get.”

-IAVA Member

America’s newest veterans face a tough economy and serious employment challenges. In 2010, the unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was a staggering 11.5 percent, leaving over 210,000 combat veterans struggling to find gainful employment after their service in the most severe economic recession in decades.

Finding a job for 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. Over 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.

We must act now for this generation of veterans. To create jobs for veterans we must pass a comprehensive veterans’ job package that includes strengthening USERRA protections, modernizing employment-transitioning services, developing tax incentives for hiring veterans, and encouraging partnerships between the veterans’ community and corporate America.

Create Jobs for Veterans

Veterans gain valuable skills and experiences in the military. We must ensure they can translate these skills to the business and academic worlds by creating and disseminating best practices to employers for veteran hiring and professional development. This will also help academia, state and local governments, and small businesses that lack the necessary resources to seek out and employ new veterans. Additionally, we must ensure veterans have an opportunity to use the technical skills they acquire as a result of their military education and experience. We have already invested in these men and women so why not profit from our investment? Seamlessly utilizing their training is good for the veterans and good for business.

We recommend Congress order a study and report of the similarities and differences between DoD and civilian skills, vocational certifications, and licenses. This study must be conducted through coordination with private business and trade groups, educational institutions, and the Departments of Labor, Education, Defense and Veteran Affairs.

The Department of Labor’s VETS program and the DoD should modernize and universally require all service members to participate in civilian employment training in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). This upgraded program must be audited every three years with recommendations reported to Congress.

We also recommend Congress incentivize the hiring of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans by creating a robust structure of tax credits and tax relief for the employer and the employee. This package of tax relief and incentives must be re-authorized after three years.

There are many high-quality programs at the federal, state and local levels. While we do not necessarily recommend creating new programs and reinventing the wheel, we must ensure current programs like Troops to Teachers are effective and provide the best level of service to our veterans.

Protect Jobs for Veterans

Currently, USERRA regulations are weak and hard to enforce. Despite almost 17 years of USERRA complaints it wasn't until this month that USERRA rights were affirmed by the Supreme Court to be akin to civil rights protections. And yet, there is still no mechanism of law to adequately enforce USERRA. By creating standardized civil and criminal procedures for those who violate USERRA, we will give USERRA the teeth it needs to protect veterans' employment.

IAVA recommends that Congress expand USERRA to cover members of the National Guard who are called to active duty for domestic response. Presently, any National Guard member working in domestic response operations is not protected by USERRA, meaning that he or she does not have the same protections as fellow service members. By passing this measure, we can ensure that all service members will be protected by USERRA no matter where they are serving.

USERRA regulations also do little to protect veterans during the USERRA violation claim process. In order to protect veterans while they are processing a claim, Congress should enact two provisions: (1) prohibit employers from firing an employee while a USERRA claim is being processed, and (2) exempt USERRA claims from pre-dispute binding arbitration agreements.

We also recommend that corporations that violate USERRA laws should be barred from government contracts. Many large corporations rely heavily on government contracts, and they often hire a large percentage of recently separated service members. Still, many violate USERRA laws with little fear of legal or financial recourse—this should not be tolerated.

Promote Veteran Entrepreneurship

Congress should also encourage entrepreneurship among our newest veterans. It should work to mitigate the effect of frequent and lengthy deployments by providing small business owners who are serving in the National Guard and Reserves with targeted tax relief and additional access to capital, insurance, and bonding through established federal and local programs.

IAVA specifically recommends that Congress expand the small business Patriot Loan program by establishing a national campaign that promotes the program to service members and new veterans. It should also guarantee veteran-owned small business bonding similar to the current structure of the VA Home Loan Guarantee program.

Congress should also expand the Small Business Administration's Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities to all veterans. This national program should be coordinated through local community colleges and the 16 Veteran Business Centers nationwide. Upon

completion of the training program, the veteran entrepreneur should then qualify for direct lending and bonding from the SBA.

II. ELIMINATE COMBAT STRESS STIGMA

59% of IAVA members surveyed in 2010 knew a veteran who committed suicide.

“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

The number of active duty suicides reached epidemic levels in 2010 with 303 suspected and confirmed in the Army alone. One active duty service member commits suicide approximately every 36 hours, and the rate for veterans is likely even worse. Serious shortages of military mental health professionals, coupled with the heavy stigma associated with seeking care, have resulted in those most at risk with invisible injuries not receiving the care they need.

IAVA is pleased to see that the President’s VA budget submission has allocated \$6 billion toward the treatment of hidden injuries such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). This is an 8.5% increase over last year’s budget. This funding is critically needed to prepare for the surge home of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a good start, but the VA and the Administration must make a serious commitment to remove the stigma of seeking care by prioritizing its outreach efforts and ensuring access to top quality mental health care. We need the President to issue a national call to mental health professionals to serve their country both in uniform and at the VA.

The stigma associated with receiving mental health care is exacerbated by the problem of inadequate treatment. More than half of soldiers and Marines in Iraq who test positive for a psychological injury report concerns that fellow service members will see them as weak. In addition, one in three of these troops worry about the effect that a mental health diagnosis will have on their career. As a result, those most in need of treatment may never seek it.

To end the suicide epidemic the VA and DoD must declare war on the stigma of combat stress. Together 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 promote combat stress injury training programs for civilian behavioral health professionals who treat veterans outside of the VA such as college counselors, rural providers, behavioral health graduate students and professional associations.

The VA must allocate specific resources to tackle this dangerous stigma; otherwise, we risk discouraging veterans from turning to the VA for help.

For our part, IAVA has embarked on a historic public service announcement campaign. In partnership with the Ad Council we fielded the largest non-government veteran support campaign to date 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 exclusively 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. This campaign has had incredible success – growing the community of veterans 270% in the past two years. We have learned a lot from this incredibly successful campaign and welcome the opportunity to share our expertise and best practices with you and the VA.

III. MODERNIZE THE VA DISABILITY CLAIMS PROCESS

45% of IAVA members surveyed in 2010 reported an unsatisfactory experience with the VA claims process.

“The VA disability process was more painful than some of my injuries.”
-IAVA member

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are receiving benefits under a VA disability system that was outdated years before most of them were born. This antiquated system, which focuses on quantity over quality, leads to frequent errors and a lengthy wait for benefits. With the backlog growing larger each month, IAVA recommends upgrades to the VA claims processing system that would digitize records, hold processors accountable for the accuracy of their work and remove unnecessary steps in the evaluation process.

In 2011, IAVA would like to see a new benefits approval process put into motion. Disabled veterans and survivors should be able to apply for benefits through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based process that enables the VA to reach accurate decisions within acceptable time frames. We applaud many of the efforts already underway within the VA. However, any reforms to the system must achieve the following goals:

Streamline the claims process for efficiency, accuracy, and timeliness

The claims process should be reformed to capitalize on successful pilots, expedite ready-to-rate claims, and remove unnecessary procedures. The VA must adopt a customer service model that rivals industry leaders like Zappos.com and USAA. They should be treated like customers, with honest, efficient, and effective care.

Make the appeals process work for veterans

With appeals taking years to complete, the VA should adopt reforms that prevent claims from getting caught in an endless loop that prevents veterans from receiving the benefits that they deserve.

Bring the claims process into the 21st Century

The VA needs to develop a modern, IT-based system for filing, processing, and rating disability claims. This system should reflect the best practices of 20 years of digital evolution; meeting the expectations of access and customer service that modern veterans have become accustomed to in everyday life. This system should provide a clear and easy way for the VA and the veteran to communicate, access benefits and monitor the progress of pending claims.

Change the passive culture at the VA

The VA needs to adopt modern business practices that promote quality and maximize productivity. The system for assigning credit for work must be reformed to reduce errors and reflect accurate credit for work completed. Training at the VA needs to be reformed so that processors can share knowledge and prevent common errors.

IV. SUPPORT BETTER CARE FOR FEMALE VETERANS

62% of female IAVA members surveyed feel that the VA is unprepared to serve them.

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

-IAVA member

Women warriors have sacrificed alongside their brothers in arms and deserve to come home to the same quality of care and benefits. As of December 2010, over 258,000 female veterans had deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, these women warriors are turning to the VA for health care; yet many are struggling to receive the care and benefits they need. Women veterans are the fastest-growing segment of the veteran population, and their enrollment in the VA is expected to more than double in the next 10 years.

While the VA has made strides in recent years, women veterans still face several barriers when seeking care at the VA, including fragmentation of services and service providers with poor understanding of women’s unique health issues and their eligibility for benefits. Female veterans also face an unwelcoming VA culture, inadequate privacy and safety practices, and no access to childcare. Specific problems that need to be addressed are availability of restrooms, auditory privacy at check-in, the need for standard exam rooms, and better care for Military Sexual Trauma. More importantly, the VA needs to stop outsourcing women’s health care and become a one-stop service for all their health care needs.

The VA must renovate its brand, making it the go-to-place for women’s health care and benefits. Cultural and organizational changes must be implemented ranging from how local clinics conduct outreach to and treat female veterans. IAVA recommends that Congress establish a firm deadline for the VA to meet its goal of providing comprehensive health care to women veterans, as recommended by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The VA must clearly outline the steps needed for all facilities to meet this goal. It must also address its inconsistent claims process and ensure female claims for PTSD are properly rated and addressed according to the VA Inspector General’s Review of Combat Stress in Women Veterans Receiving VA Health Care and Disability Benefits.

Today, inadequate care has placed a tremendous burden on veterans and their families. Divorce rates among women warriors are double the rate for their civilian counterparts; suicide rates are three times higher. The impact of inadequate care for these women warriors has also manifested in a higher rate of homelessness. According to the VA, approximately 10 percent of the 107,000 homeless veterans on any given night are women; this rate is two to four percent higher than for civilian women. As our military evolves, so must the VA. It is our responsibility as advocates and lawmakers to ensure that no servicemember is left behind.

V. EASE THE TRANSITION HOME

36% of IAVA members surveyed in 2010 use VA health care.

“We owe it to our veterans to provide the best mental health resources available, and currently we are falling far too short of that goal.”

- IAVA Member

Timely and adequate funding for the VA and key DoD programs is essential for providing our nation’s heroes with the smooth transition home that they deserve. Advance appropriations put an end to the unfortunate practice of rationing health care for veterans when budgets were approved late. Over half a million veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have turned to the VA for medical care after separating from the service. As hundreds of thousands of troops return home, the VA can expect a steady influx of new veterans in coming years. IAVA recommends that Congress provide adequate and timely funding for the VA by ensuring that the budget at least matches the recommendations of the annual Independent Budget as it has for the past four years. We also recommend Congress continue to approve funding two years in advance.

More than 2.2 million Americans have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. When they return home, they require medical treatment, a smooth transition from DoD to the VA and support for their families.

During the past two years, Congress and the White House delivered on their solemn commitment to provide these returning veterans with the “best care anywhere” by allocating both adequate and timely funding for the VA. The VA’s funding levels have matched the recommendations of the Independent Budget for four years, and at the beginning of the 111th Congress the budget for veterans’ health care was approved two years in advance. Timely and adequate funding is essential for providing our nation’s heroes with a smooth transition home. It will put an end to the practice of rationing health care for veterans when budgets are late.

It is unacceptable that last year’s VA budget was approved late for the twenty-first time in the past twenty-four years. Six months into the fiscal year the budget for 2011 is still outstanding and Congress is facing the real possibility of a government shutdown that in years past would have seriously affected veterans’ health care. This situation directly reinforces the need for funding the VA fully in advance.

Conclusion

Caring for the men and women who defend freedom is a solemn responsibility that belongs to lawmakers, business leaders, and 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. However, despite critical successes, veterans' employment, mental health, claims, women's' health care, and guaranteed 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.