

Patrick Campbell, Legislative Director, IAVA

U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

IAVA Testimony

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, on behalf of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), thank you for this opportunity to address, "The VA's response to the mental health needs of today's veterans."

My name is SGT Patrick Campbell and I am a combat medic for the DC National Guard, an OIF vet and the Legislative Director for the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America. IAVA is the nation's first and largest organization for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. IAVA believes that the troops and veterans who were and are on the front lines are uniquely qualified to speak about and educate the public about the realities of war, its implications on the health of our military, and its impact on national security.

Everyone on this committee has heard the statistic that one in three Iraq veterans and one in nine Afghanistan veterans will suffer from a mental health problem as a result of their service. Every statistic like this represents a name and a heart wrenching story. I am here today to tell you what my counselor at the DC Vet Center told me in my first session, "No one goes to war and comes home the same person they were when they left."

The system that the Department of Veteran Affairs employs to treat servicemembers with mental health issues suffers from a fundamentally fatal flaw. It is a passive system. It is a system that waits. It waits for servicemembers to acknowledge that they a problem. It is system that waits for servicemembers to ask for help. The system is n and we must fix it before we lose this generation of heroes.

In preparation for this testimony, I decided that rather than searching my heart for another dark shadow to bring into the light, I would use this as an opportunity to check in with my 20 brothers from Iraq. What I found not only disturbed me, but scared me. Two years later with redeployments looming on the horizon, the once proud Alpha Company Killas are now struggling to find their place in the world. From my Lieutenant down to the gunners, no one has been spared. Strained marriages, ruined engagements, methamphetamines, alcohol and sleepless nights are just some of the stories I have heard.

Three out of the four gunners are suffering from severe PTSD and substance abuse. The fourth went on active duty because he could not think of being surrounded by civilians again. All of them are desperately in need of help, but too proud to ask. One story in particular breaks my heart. We call him Manimal (half man, half animal). He had a smile like Clark Kent, a contagious hearty laugh, and deadly right hook. He was a simple giant, who the kids in Iraq loved to play with.

On more than one occasion while serving in Iraq a car would come too close, would ignore warning shots and Manimal would have to do his job. I personally witnessed him light up three or four cars essentially riddle them full of bullets because when the choice was between us and them, Manimal was the most loyal friend one could ever have. I remember one day finding Manimal alone in corner and I asked him how he was. He whispered but never made eye contact with me and stated, "I saw my bullet hit that driver in the chest. I saw his face as he lost control of his car. I watched the car hit the wall as we drove by. I couldn't say anything because... well because. We just kept driving." As a medic I had to make life-and-death decisions when an emergency arose, Manimal made them every time we crossed on to a highway.

When Manimal got home he never kept a job longer then 2 weeks. He couldn't stand being told what to do by an 18-year high school graduate who never saw what he saw. He often drank too much and one night he got caught. He was charged with a DUI and lost his driver's license.

He would call me late in the night, just to talk... just to talk with someone who understood. Finally Manimal decided he wanted to be a medic. This profession would be his penance for the lives he took. He finished Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) classes and passed the test (a huge step because he never graduated high school) only to be told he couldn't start till he got his driver's license back. As he waited to start his job he spent all his money on a woman who said she loved him, but when the money ran out so did she. Now a man who found his path after coming home is still being held back by his past. Currently he is living on his mother's couch, still drinking too much, and is up to his ears in debt. He only sees one solution out of this mess, to go back to Iraq and be some one again.

Although we come from different backgrounds Manimal and I are very similar. When we got home we both drank too much, made impulsive decisions, shut the world out and tried to fill that gaping hole in our souls with women. We are also too proud to ask for help and too scared to admit when we have a problem. Two years later, the only difference between Manimal and I is that I am blessed with friends who forced me to get counseling. I was given an ultimatum, "Go to counseling or lose another friend." Sadly, Manimal's support network broke under the weight of his problems.

The answer to the problems Manimal and I face requires face to face counseling with a licensed mental health professional for every servicemember returning home from a combat zone. Only then will we remove the stigma and fear of asking for help. Don't misunderstand me, because the soldiers will complain, but just like a kid complaining about taking a bath after playing all day in the dirt... everyone knows we just need to do it.

Once we get these servicemembers in the VA's door we need to make sure they are in the counseling room and not waiting for hours in the lobby. A recent USA Today article stated that although the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans using the Vet centers has nearly tripled over the past 3 years, the number of staff has been increased by only 9.3%. We cannot wait for the storm to come to start preparing, we must fully staff these facilities and look to expand them to new communities.

Lastly, Manimal has only a few months left to enroll in the VA to be treated for conditions "potentially related to his combat service" such as his readjustment issues. The two year

eligibility window is unrealistic and confusing for a National Guard soldier who thinks that being in the reserves means they are not yet a veteran, especially those in a unit that will probably be redeployed in a matter of months. A five-year eligibility period would let our service men and women have the opportunity to settle into their lives before they start to lose their benefits.

Thank you for listening to my story. Thank you for listening to Manimal's story. And thank you for listening to all of our stories. This Congress has come a long way over the past four months, as evidenced by the fact that Veterans and not administrators are the first to speak at these hearings. Going forward, we have an obligation to create a culture where veterans' needs also come first, and returning troops do not have to beg for help because the help is already there.

Respectfully Submitted,

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