

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

Testimony of Tom Tarantino
Deputy Policy Director, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
IAVA's Legislative Priorities for 2012
March 21, 2012

Chairwoman Murray, Chairman Miller, Ranking Members Burr and Filner, members of both Committees, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America's over 200,000 member veterans and supporters, thank you for inviting me to present IAVA's legislative priorities for 2012.

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 those 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.

As an Iraq veteran and veterans' advocate, I have seen firsthand the difficulties that many veterans face when transitioning out of active-duty service. I have seen young veterans who spent most of their formative years in uniform struggle to get the quality job training they need to be successful in the workforce. I have also seen wounded warriors who have made extraordinary sacrifices on the frontline return home with physical and mental health injuries. For both, the transition is difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible. It is for these veterans and their families that each year IAVA asks: "Is our country prepared to build and support the New Greatest Generation?"

Unfortunately, with threats to the efficacy of veterans' benefits, continually high new veteran unemployment, and record high suicide rates, we are far from being able to answer "yes." However, IAVA remains confident we can do it. IAVA's 2012 Policy Agenda is a blueprint for addressing these issues head on, to ensure that every veteran has our country's unwavering support from the moment they return home throughout the rest of their lives.

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

- 1) Continue to ensure that veterans are successful in the workforce.
- 2) Ensure that veterans' earned education benefits make them career-ready and provide quality job training.
- 3) Stem the tide of veteran suicide.

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 simply do not understand the value of their skills and military experience. A 2010 survey found that 60 percent of employers don't 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 2012 we must focus on implementing the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, making employment services more efficient, expanding TAP to encourage entrepreneurship, and ensuring that our veterans are receiving quality job training when using their hard earned benefits.

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 for 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.

Many of the provisions of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, however 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.

Making the Transition Assistance Program mandatory for all separating servicemembers was a key component to the VOW to Hire Heroes Act. IAVA believes that a revamped TAP will be an invaluable resource to veterans when stepping into the civilian world. We also applaud the President's recent announcement that TAP will include expanded entrepreneurship training for veterans who wish to start their own businesses. However, we must acknowledge that the decisions made when leaving service do not always reflect what a veteran will need to be successful. Many veterans may choose to go to school before entering the workforce. Many will enter the workforce before choosing to strike out on their own and start a business. IAVA

believes that as we update and expand the TAP program, we should also make it available to veterans who may need retake the TAP program, or participate in the additional training that TAP may offer.

Among the most useful programs administered by the VA are its educational programs. Almost 1 million veterans and their family members have used, or are using, the Post-9/11 GI Bill to further their education, enhance their job skills and help build their career. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most robust and potentially effective job training and retraining benefit enacted by Congress in a generation. Also, expansions to Vocational Rehabilitation and the Montgomery GI Bill in the VOW to Hire Heroes Act will ensure that veterans will have even more opportunities to gain the critical job training and retraining they need to be successful in the civilian workforce. Yet, these critical programs are under threat due to 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 to pursue a traditional education. However, for-profits received more than a third of GI Bill funds, while only accounting for less than a third of GI Bill graduates in 2009. GI Bill users are also pursuing education at for-profits in significant numbers. Out of the top ten institutions receiving GI Bill money, eight are for-profits. IAVA is concerned that this industry is not producing a return proportional to the benefits being spent and too many vets are squandering their hard-earned benefits.

IAVA believes that a three-pronged approach 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 servicemembers 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 this data so that it 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 into the workforce. These veterans should be able to take advantage of VA vocational counseling and 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.

After Congress enacted the World-War II GI Bill in 1944, many for-profit schools emerged for the sole purpose of poaching veterans' benefits. They provided education and training that was substandard, expensive, and did not lead to a job. To fight this, in 1952 Congress enacted protections to ensure that the free market would weed out institutions that did not produce a useful product for its students. It was called the 85-15 rule. It said that while 85% of a for-profit school's revenue could come from government funds, 15% had to come from consumers that actually wanted to buy their product. This was so successful that Congress adopted a similar regulation that applied to federal financial aid. Today, a for-profit school can receive 90% of its funding from federal sources, and 10% from consumers. Unfortunately, Congress did not include VA or DoD benefits as "federal dollars." This inequity in the law, coupled with the generosity of benefits like the Post-9/11 GI Bill, has essentially removed the free market protections that the 90-10 rule is meant to provide. It has allowed for-profit schools to aggressively recruit veterans and service members because under the current law, for every vet a for-profit school recruits, they can get 9 more on federal financial aid. IAVA recommends that Congress act swiftly to address this loophole in the law, in order to restore free market control to the industry and prevent bad actors from looking at veterans as dollar signs in uniform.

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 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 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. More education, combined with the discipline, technical skills, maturity, and knowledge that America's fighting men and women have developed through their service, will deliver great returns 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.

Members of both the House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees have legislation drafted to address this potential threat to the Post-9/11 GI Bill. We would like to thank Senators Murray and Webb, as well as Congressmen Stutzman and Bilirakis for their leadership on this issue. We look forward to working with both committees to ensure that a comprehensive and bipartisan bill reaches the President's desk by the end of the summer.

Suicide and Mental Health

Sadly, this generation of service members and veterans is fighting another battle against suicide. 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 every day. The VA also does not consistently share its data on veteran suicide. In addition, it does not generally account for the almost half 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. We are highly encouraged that the VA been working on expanding this reporting to 48 states. However, we are concerned that it will take nearly two years to aggregate the data. Only when we can accurately and efficiently collect data on veteran suicide can we effectively target resources and develop programs to combat the problem.

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 that 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, it is the only state that has been comprehensively studied. Comparing these results to IAVA's national member survey we believe that RAND's results in the New York survey 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 study 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 – a serious concern and evidence of a severe communications divide.

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 knowledge of experts in both the mental health and advertising fields. For our part, IAVA has partnered with the Ad Council on 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 a national effort.

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 and employment 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.