



Statement of Tom Porter
Legislative Director
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

June 15, 2017

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our views on the legislation under consideration today. For thirteen years, IAVA has been the preferred empowerment organization for Post-9/11 veterans. IAVA's "Big 4" Policy Priorities for the 115th Congress are to Fully Recognize and Improve Services for Women Veterans, Defend Veterans Education Benefits—particularly the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA Reform, and Battling Military/Veteran Suicide.

This year, we have tackled women veterans issues head on by launching our #SheWhoBorneTheBattle campaign, a critical component of which is the *Deborah Sampson Act* (S. 681), by Sens. Tester and Boozman, to improve recognition and services for women veterans.

In addition to being on the forefront of women veterans issues, IAVA also played a lead role in passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. It is for that reason that, while we appreciate the invitation to submit written testimony for the record, we are deeply concerned that IAVA has been denied the opportunity to provide oral testimony today.

IAVA not only fought for the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2008, but championed upgrades in 2010 and 2014. Our members remain deeply engaged in the future of this landmark benefit and share their opinions often with us. In our most recent member survey, 66% of respondents have used or are using the Post-9/11 GI Bill, while another 24% intend to. Seventy-four percent also expressed great satisfaction with the Post-9/11 GI Bill, rating the benefit either as "Excellent" or "Good." While our members want to continue to



improve the GI Bill, they also want to protect it. In fact, 87% of our survey respondents oppose cuts to the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

In 2016, IAVA's year-long campaign to "Defend the GI Bill" killed over \$4 billion in proposed cuts, and last month stopped a proposed GI Bill tax on troops in its tracks. That relentless advocacy on behalf of veterans' *earned* benefits, however, should be rewarded not punished. IAVA's members should not be denied their seat at the table for defending what is arguably our generation's most important veterans' benefit.

We appreciate the work of both Committees to continue to identify additional ways to improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill. IAVA has supported some of these provisions. However, paying for them on the backs of veterans is *never* the right thing to do.

A key change IAVA continues to support that protects the GI Bill from abuse is closing the "90/10" loophole, which rewards poor-performing schools that intentionally target veterans for their education benefits. Currently, no more than 90% of a for-profit school's revenue can be generated by federal funds, thus requiring them to prove their value for the final 10% through the free market. However, because the law was written to exclude federal GI Bill benefits from the 90% the legislative intent has not been realized and problems continue to persist, hence creating a loophole. This loophole could be closed by simply including VA and DoD education benefits in the category of "government funds." We strongly encourage Congress to take up this issue.

Lack of action from Congress on this important issue has had devastating consequences. The closings of ITT Tech, Corinthian colleges, and other for-profit schools have left many student veterans in hardship as they struggle to complete degree programs with the GI Bill benefits they have left, while also being straddled with student debt that they incurred from these for-profit schools. As such, the 90/10 loophole has created a reality that unjustly wastes the money of American taxpayers and deprives veterans of the education benefits they have earned. While closing the loophole is not the only solution, it is a significant step Congress should take to improve education outcomes for veterans.

IAVA appreciates the work that Senators have invested in the interest of improving and streamlining programs for veterans in the GI Bill "Discussion Draft." IAVA does not have significant concerns with many of its provisions. However, as we have previously stated, any improvements to veterans programs should not reduce other veterans benefits now being provided.



Below we have highlighted specific sections for further comment:

IAVA supports Sect. 4 in general. The monthly education benefits under the Dependents Educational Assistance program should receive annual cost of living increases to keep pace with annual rate changes.

IAVA agrees with the intent behind Sect. 8. However, we recognize that survivor benefits and transferability is complex and we encourage the Committee to continue engaging with the VA and the VSO community to ensure an effective solution.

IAVA strongly supports Sect. 10, which would provide the VA Secretary with the authorities to restore benefits for Post-9/11 GI Bill students who attended schools that have closed permanently and continue housing payments for a limited time. Veterans and their families should not be punished for the failure of their schools.

Sect. 12 is consistent with IAVA's *Policy Agenda*, which calls for VA modernization and replacement of its Information Technology systems to more effectively administer VA programs, including education benefits.

In general, IAVA supports Sect. 13, as we generally support increased transparency, including data and outcomes that demonstrate the administration and use of VA benefits, including education benefits.

IAVA supports Sect. 18. We feel strongly that veterans achieving merit-based scholarships and other educational support should not be short-changed when they use the benefit that they earned through their service.

Among the bills under consideration today, IAVA strongly supports the *Purple Heart GI Bill Act (S. 882)*. This commonsense bill provides Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility to Purple Heart recipients, regardless of time served. We ask that Congress pass this legislation so that our nation's veterans who have made such significant sacrifices are provided full GI Bill benefits. It is simply the right thing to do.

IAVA supports the general intent of the *Educational Development for Troops and Veterans Act (S. 473)* which would provide protections to ensure that Guard and Reserve members who deploy on active duty have parity with their active duty counterparts with regard to benefits earned during the active time period.



The *Yellow Ribbon Improvement Act (S. 798)* is IAVA-supported legislation that would expand eligibility for the Yellow Ribbon Program to recipients of the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry scholarship. IAVA strongly believes that students who qualify for the Fry scholarship should also be allotted the benefits of the Yellow Ribbon Programs as their parents or spouses have made the ultimate sacrifice on our nation's behalf.

IAVA believes that the *Veterans TEST Accessibility Act (S. 1192)* is a sound piece of legislation as it pro-rates an appropriate amount for an individual to use towards tests, licensing, certification. Current law requires an individual to use a full month of their GI Bill eligibility to pay for these provisions, which defeats the purpose of an individual having this GI Bill flexibility and removes their incentive to utilize it. This change in law is fair and reasonable.

S. 1209, a bill to increase the special pension for medal of honor recipients from \$1,000 to \$3,000 per month is legislation that IAVA has wholeheartedly supported since the last Congress.

Finally, IAVA supports the *Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses Act (S. 1277)* as it would allow veterans to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill to learn valuable IT skills such as computer coding and programming. These sorts of programs are not typically covered by the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and they should be as learning these skills would benefit many veterans. In overseeing the implementation of this bill once it becomes law, IAVA strongly recommends Congress work to ensure the law is free from the GI bill abuses some for-profit school programs have practiced in recent years.

The Arla Harrell Act (*S. 75*), Filipino Veterans Promise Act (*S. 111*), and the Janey Ensminger Act (*S. 758*) are consistent with IAVA's Policy Agenda in our call to honor those veterans who have come before us. *S. 75* and *S. 758* are also critical in addressing the impact of toxic exposures.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to leave you with this thought: American servicemembers willfully answered their nation's call to duty after the devastating events of 9/11. In fulfilling that duty the military and U.S. taxpayers spared no expense, with the goal of providing us with an overwhelming advantage in war.

Veterans are proud to have served our country and we need Congress to know that the educational benefits we receive as a result of our service is a cost of war, and just as important as properly equipping those deploying downrange as we speak. We have got



to spare no expense in empowering our veterans to succeed. Veterans are not a special interest - they answered the call when more than ninety-nine percent of Americans did not. If Congress genuinely cares about our nation's veterans, then they too must commit to "Defend the GI Bill" for Post-9/11 veterans.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's priorities with you here today. We look forward to working with each of you in the 115th Congress.

Biography of Tom Porter

Tom Porter is Legislative Director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). In this role, Tom leads IAVA's Capitol Hill efforts to advocate for our nation's veterans. Prior to joining IAVA, Porter was Vice President at Morgan Meguire, a federal government relations firm, since 2004. He was successful in achieving goals on behalf of a nationwide client base through aggressive and bi-partisan advocacy before Congress and federal agencies. He also served nine years on the staffs of three Members of Congress, most recently with former House Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter.

Porter is also a Commander in the U.S. Navy Reserve and a veteran military public affairs officer with service on four continents, including deployments to Afghanistan and the Arabian Gulf. He is a California native and holds a B.A. in Political Science from California State University, San Bernardino. Tom also serves as a spokesman for IAVA policy priorities, and has contributed to POLITICO, NPR, PBS NewsHour, Military Times, Stars and Stripes, and other media outlets.