



Statement of Paul Rieckhoff
before the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees
Wednesday, March 16th, 2016

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Founder and Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
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Chairman Isakson, Chairman Miller, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Brown, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our 450,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our policy priorities for 2016, including our “Big Four”: Continuing to Combat Suicide, Improving Services for Women Veterans, VA Accountability, and Defending the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

After a dozen years, IAVA has become the preferred empowerment organization for post-9/11 veterans. Since its beginning IAVA has fought for and been successful in advocating for policy beneficial to meet the needs of today’s veteran. Much like VSOs who have previously had their own individual platform on which to testify before this Joint Committee, I ask that going forward, IAVA be afforded the same opportunity, thus allowing for a more thorough discussion of our Policy Agenda.

Chairmen, according to the Congressional calendar, from today until the election, Congress will only be in session 62 days. Given this abbreviated schedule, IAVA encourages you to focus on top priorities facing today’s veterans, including the following issues important to our members.

Keep Fighting to Reduce Veteran Suicide

As you all know, this time last year we were celebrating the enactment of the *Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act*, intended to help reduce veteran suicides and improve access to quality mental health care for those in need. Given this historic and bipartisan success, it is critical to know the status of current implementation efforts.



To that end, Chairman Miller, late last year, you indicated a willingness to hold a hearing on the Clay Hunt SAV Act around its first anniversary. IAVA would like to again ask that your Committee hold a hearing on the SAV Act, so that we can not only as a community discuss the current state of implementation efforts, but also next steps to address this critical issue. Suicide among veterans is still a crisis. IAVA's latest member survey shows that while more IAVA members are seeking help for mental health injuries, a good news story, compared to our 2014 Member Survey, there are also a higher percentage who have thought about taking their life and who know an Iraq or Afghanistan veteran who have either attempted suicide or died by suicide. We ask you to keep pushing on this and work on next steps for a SAV Act 2.0 focused on access, capacity and quality.

We applaud the VA's recent announcement to elevate the VA Suicide Prevention Office and provide it additional resources. While we would still like to see the elevation of this office to the level of the Secretary to allow the Suicide Prevention Office to work between the Veterans Health and Benefits Administrations to address this critical issue, we are committed to working with the VA to ensure that the vision that IAVA had when first making this recommendation is realized. We call upon Congress to appropriate and line-item \$80 million to this office to ensure its success.

IAVA is also very concerned that women veterans die by suicide at nearly six times the rate of civilian women, and we call on Congress to pass the *Female Suicide Prevention Act* (H.R.2915/S.2487), recently approved unanimously by the House. Rather than place women in mental health programs that are not working, among its provisions is a requirement that the VA track the satisfaction rate of mental health programs utilized most by women allowing them access to programs which are deemed most useful in helping prevent suicide and meeting their mental health needs.

It is past time that DoD and VA also address the most vulnerable among our service members and veterans. These are the veterans that received an other than honorable discharge, in some cases because of a psychological injury that they were struggling with.

Swords to Plowshares recently estimated that there are over 125,000 post-9/11 veterans who have received an other than honorable discharge. This population often is left without access to VA service and benefits. The process by which they apply for review by the VA to determine their eligibility for services is lengthy, sometimes years, and the onus is on the veteran to initiate. Only 10 percent of those have received an eligibility review. These veterans are at higher risk for suicide and homelessness, and often community programs that serve veterans hold the same eligibility criteria as the VA, so they don't qualify for those



programs either. They need our help. IAVA supports the *Fairness for Veterans Act* (H.R. 4683 / S. 1567) to ensure proper due process for service members whose condition should have been diagnosed and considered prior to their discharge from the military. But we also recognize that DoD and VA need to work together with the VSO community to formulate a more comprehensive plan to address this issue.

Invest in the Success of Women Veterans

Women veterans make up over 20 percent of IAVA membership and over 30 percent of our leadership. They are also the fastest growing segment of the veteran population. Yet women veterans are too often forgotten. While our members are proud of their service, they're tired of having to defend that service. The vast majority don't feel the American public recognizes their service and sacrifice. Less than 10 percent of IAVA women veterans who responded to our member survey felt that the general public understands the contribution of women in the military; that's appalling. As a nation, we must be better.

The VA has made great progress over the last decade improving services for women, but they haven't fully answered the call to provide comprehensive care for women. While IAVA's women veteran members have reported receiving some great care at the VA, they also report continued challenges seeking and receiving quality care. Sixty percent of women veterans responding to IAVA's member survey reported that experiencing a time at the VA where they felt uncomfortable seeking care.

Women veterans continue to have higher rates of unemployment and be more at risk for experiencing homelessness, and the increase in the suicide rate among this population is a wake-up call. In IAVA's own member survey, women were more likely than men to have difficulty finding stable housing. We must raise public awareness of the service and sacrifices of women veterans, strengthen research, improve gender-specific care and improve employment, housing and childcare services.

More can and must be done for our women veterans to ensure they have the right medical professionals and facilities available to provide for the unique care they so often are lacking. Many provisions within the *Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act* (H.R.1356 / S.471) would help accomplish this specific goal. IAVA is pleased to see the VA internally initiate some of the bill's provisions, but the remainder of the provisions, which include improving VA facilities and holding VA executives accountable for ensuring adequate care for women veterans through performance measures, must be passed by Congress this year. Women veterans have waited long enough for proper facilities, adequate access to care and accountable VA executives. The wait must end.



The necessary improvements to care and services for women veterans can only be accomplished with adequate funding to support such improvements.

Currently, dedicated funds for women's health care is not a line-item in the VA budget, which can make meeting the needs of this growing population of VA users challenging for the Women's Health Program. In order to fully support women veterans, the VA budget should include a sub-line item under Primary Care that allocates 10 percent of the budget to women veterans care specifically, which would help to fund the critical Designated Women's Health Providers and their support staff. This should be coupled with 15 percent of the Mental Health budget to have a sub-line item for women veterans. Ensuring VA leadership's support for women veterans is critical, and it needs to include adequate budgetary support.

Reform the VA and DOD for Today's Veterans

After the VA scandal that came to light in 2014, the problems the veteran community had brought up for years finally became abundantly clear to the entire nation. There is an opportunity now to finally reform a broken system and to give the VA Secretary the tools, resources, authority and space to succeed—while of course being held accountable.

While a vast majority of VA employees serve veterans in an exemplary way, there are also those who discredit the VA through underperforming or negligent acts. Being able to jettison those employees in an expedited manner that also protects the whistleblower is key to restoring VA morale and providing the veteran with the highest quality and most timely care possible.

Further, we support Secretary McDonald's recent endorsement of Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson's idea to amend Title 38 making the Department's executives at-will employees, and providing the Secretary the needed tools to meet the salary requirements to match private-sector compensation of health care personnel. Additionally, we were an early supporter of Chairman Miller's House-passed *VA Accountability Act* (H.R.1994) to make it easier for the VA Secretary to purge VA employees deemed to be bad actors.

IAVA calls on Congress to bridge the partisan divide and work now to pass a strong accountability bill that can be passed by the Senate and signed into law. We are encouraged by Chairman Isakson's recent comments that he would like to move a VA accountability bill by the end of March and are very much anticipating the final product of negotiations.

The VA, with Congress' support, must also reform into a truly 21st century VA by eliminating the appeals backlog. Even before the scandal within the VA health



system, IAVA partnered with Congress to highlight the urgency of addressing the VA claims backlog that at its peak was over 600,000 in 2013. This number has been greatly reduced over the past three years, but in the process has created a backlog of appeals. While around 75,000 appeals awaited adjudication in 2013, that number had risen to around 325,000 by the end of 2015.

To truly 'End the VA Backlog' we must aggressively attack the appeals backlog in the same way we did the claims backlog. Congress was essential to that fight, and your continued support will be needed to see the entirety of this problem reach resolution.

Additionally, funding and key structures at VA in particular **MUST** be protected from short-sighted cuts and political posturing. We must all work together to create a veteran-centric system that is tailored to meet our needs for decades to come.

I read with interest the recent statements of Chairmen Isakson and Miller urging the next Administration to keep Secretary McDonald on as their VA Secretary. I too feel that he is indeed the right man for the job. Under his tenure, the VA has improved. The claims backlog has been significantly reduced, homelessness is down and the Veterans Crisis Line remains a critical resource for veterans in need -- and a key partner of IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program that has helped more than 6,100 veterans get the assistance they need.

However, that is not enough. We **MUST** work together to:

- Improve the veterans experience
- Modernize VA contact centers, including the Veterans Crisis Line
- Increase access to health care and improve community care
- Continue to reduce veteran homelessness

We all knew this would be a long road, and you must give him the funding and flexibility to finally reform the VA once and for all.

Defend Veteran and Military Education Benefits

After sacrificing years of their lives to protect our freedom, our veterans have earned the right to obtain a high-quality, affordable education with the help of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which IAVA fought hard to establish. Since 2009, over one million veterans and their families have used the landmark benefit, and millions more will use it in the years to come. Among IAVA's own members, 50 percent of member survey respondents have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill themselves or transferred it to their dependents. Of the remaining 50 percent who have not yet used the benefit, 29 percent plan to in the future. The GI Bill invests in this



generation of veterans; it is a critical tool to helping them to continue to be leaders at home.

In six years, I understand that GI Bill expenditures have totaled over \$50 billion. Although only one-third of veterans enrolled at for-profit schools, this sector accounted for 40 percent—more than \$8 billion—in overall tuition payments for veterans and their dependents through FY 2014. Congress has a responsibility to protect our veterans from bad actors in the for-profit industry and to protect taxpayers' investment.

Congress must finally close the 90/10 loophole that reward these bad actors for targeting veterans. While not every for-profit college is a bad actor, and closing the 90/10 loophole is not the only solution, it is a significant step Congress should take to improve education outcomes for veterans.

Additionally, recent actions by the House, which used the GI Bill as a piggy bank to fund other veterans programs is of great concern to IAVA. While there are initiatives in the omnibus legislation that by themselves we have supported, a 50 percent reduction in the housing allowance for veterans' children who will receive transferred GI Bill benefits is a broken promise to our military.

IAVA encourages your committees to find alternative funding sources. If not, we will continue to oppose the bill.

Other Priorities

Beyond our Big Four priorities for this Congress, you must continue to also support the families of our fallen, focus on unemployment, innovate healthcare, support those exposed to burn pits, support our military families, expand on the success of veterans courts, and end veteran homelessness. Our veterans and their families deserve it after their sacrifices during so many years at war.

Veterans are not a charity, we are an investment and should be empowered. Given the challenges of legislating in an election year, Congress must stay focused on continuing that investment. The lives of our military and veterans don't grind to a halt as November approaches and neither should Congress when it comes to fulfilling commitment to those that have served.

Members of the Committee, 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 critical months ahead and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.