



Statement of Jeremy Butler
Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
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Chairman Isakson, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Tester and Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members of the Committees, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members worldwide, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to introduce myself and testify here today.

Although I have served IAVA members in several leadership roles for more than three years, last month, I took over as CEO of the organization following the transition of our Founder, Paul Rieckhoff, to our Board of Directors. Our entire organization was founded and built on his vision and leadership following his return from Iraq, and I am humbled to take the helm of this incredible organization.

I joined the Navy in 1999 and was commissioned as a Surface Warfare Officer. I served on active duty for 6 years to include deploying in 2003 on the USS Gary (FFG-51) in support of the invasion of Iraq. I transitioned out in 2006 and went straight to the Navy Reserves where I continue to serve today.

My path to the military was fundamentally shaped by my parents and their devotion to national service. The defining service characteristic of my family however was the Peace Corps. My parents met in 1962 during their training to serve in the West African country of Togo. My parents came from very different backgrounds but both were inspired by President Kennedy's call for young Americans to serve their country and the cause of freedom. The stories I was surrounded with of their time in the Peace Corps and what they learned from it shaped my view of what it means to give back to your country. Before my father served in the Peace Corps though, he also served in the Army. It was not easy being a black man in America in the 1950s and it was not any easier in the Army he would tell me. However, I know that he cherished his military service almost as much as he cherished his time in the Peace Corps. Both profoundly affected him and taught him that serving to support others was far more noble than serving yourself.



I almost joined the Peace Corps myself but ultimately chose the Navy. Unfortunately, my father didn't live to see me follow his path to military service or even to see me consider the Peace Corps. He would have been proud of either choice I made but I think he would have been especially proud to have seen me begin working with IAVA in 2015. "You don't wait to do what's right" he would say. "You do it as soon as you know that it's right."

IAVA members have spent 15 years fighting for what's right for veterans. Since its beginning, IAVA has fought for and has been successful in advocating for beneficial policies that meet the needs of our generation of veterans. The issues we've cracked the seal on haven't always been popular in the beginning, but they always are by the end. Our members are the next generation and continue to show not just what's happening, but what's coming next.

In 2019, IAVA will continue its focus on six priorities that our members see as most pressing. This "Big Six" contain the challenges and opportunities that IAVA members care about most -- and see as areas where we can uniquely make an impact. They include the following campaigns: Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, Government Reform, Burn Pits and Toxic Exposures, Defense of the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Education Benefits, Support for Women Veterans, and empowering veterans who want to use Medical Cannabis. IAVA members are poised to educate the public, design solutions for positive impact, and lead the way to the future. That starts with our 2019 Big Six outlined below. Each campaign will drive toward outcomes in 4 key areas: 1) Public Awareness 2) Executive Action 3) Legislative Change and 4) Local Support.

1) Continue the Campaign to Combat Suicide Among Troops and Veterans

For nearly a decade, IAVA and the veteran community has called for immediate action by our nation's leaders to appropriately respond to the crisis of 20 military and veterans dying every day by suicide. Thanks to the courage and leadership of veterans, military family members and our allies, there has been tremendous progress. The issue of veteran suicide is now the subject of increased media coverage, a reduction in stigma for seeking treatment, and a surge of government, non-profit and private support.

In 2014, IAVA and our partners jump-started a national dialogue. But the flood of need continues nationwide--and continues to rise. In our recently-released 2019 Member Survey, 65% of IAVA members knew a post-9/11 veteran who attempted suicide. Fifty-nine percent know a post-9/11 veteran that died by suicide. In addition, over 75% of IAVA's membership believes that the nation is not doing enough to combat military and veteran suicide. The IAVA-led Campaign to Combat Suicide and the passage of the *Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act* in 2015 was a historic breach element. But veterans continue to be more at risk for suicide the and growing need for mental health care continues to stress an already



overstressed system. Every day, we are losing more of our brothers and sisters to suicide. This is not the time for America to let up. This is a time to redouble our efforts as a nation and answer the call to action. And IAVA will continue to maintain our leadership on that charge, where we will push for greater awareness, support, and action. We have continued to advocate in the media, testify on Capitol Hill, reach out in person and online to veterans nationwide, and vigilantly monitor the implementation of the *SAV Act* by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

We also continue to spread public awareness for the suicide crisis as thought leaders in panels, roundtable discussions with policymakers, a massive activation on the National Mall, and in documentaries. Sobering statistics on suicide continue to be released, identifying women veterans at especially high risk of suicide. IAVA's groundbreaking Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP) staffed by masters-level counselors continues to serve as a safety net for thousands. In 2018, we provided nearly 130 connections to mental health support for veterans and family members around the country, ensuring that those in need of help can easily access the quality support they need. Importantly, we have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the VA's Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) which allows us to provide a warm handoff with a trained responder at the VCL, where the at-risk veteran is never left alone or hung up on, literally preventing veteran suicide. In 2018, RRRP connected 39 veterans to the VCL, which means that about every week and a half VTMs connected a veteran that was either currently suicidal or at-risk of suicide with life-saving support. IAVA's RRRP and the VCL have been in partnership since RRRP launched in 2012, and has connected nearly 240 veterans to this life-saving resource.

In 2019, IAVA will not only continue to monitor the progress in implementing the *Clay Hunt SAV Act*, but we will seek an expansion of mental health and suicide prevention services. IAVA will continue working with Ranking Member Tester and a bipartisan coalition of legislators to fight for passage of their soon to be introduced comprehensive mental health improvement bill, which will bring even greater attention and resources to the VA to combat the veteran suicide crisis. IAVA is encouraged by the bill's investment into a number of studies, such as a study on Vet Centers' Readjustment Counselors efficacy, an increased funding in telehealth, and an increased number of tracking metrics to ensure that the VA is providing the best possible mental health care possible.

2) Modernize Government to Support the Post-9/11 Generation

Over the past few years, VA has made strides in modernizing its operating systems both internally and externally. The plan currently underway to bridge VA and DoD medical records, replacing a decades-old electronic medical record system, and updating VA.gov to be more



interactive and intuitive are among the major accomplishments that have been in the works for years. A system slowly and surely moving to the 21st century is a win for all veterans.

All veterans, including the post-9/11 generation, rely on VA for both health care and benefits. Ensuring that the system is able and agile enough to accommodate the millions of veterans that use its services is paramount to ensuring the lasting success and health of the veteran population. According to VA data, about 48% of all veterans and about 55% of post-9/11 era veterans are enrolled in VA care. Among IAVA member survey respondents, 81% are enrolled in VA health care and the vast majority have sought care from VA in the last year. And 81% of these VA users rated their experience at VA as average or above average. IAVA members have been clear that access to VA care can be challenging, but once in the system, they prefer that care. Further, independent reviews of VA health care support that the care is as good, if not better than the private sector.

But more needs to be done and a bold approach to ensure today's veterans are met with a system willing to bend and adapt to them will take the full coordination of the executive branch and Congress, along with stakeholder partners in state and local governments, and the private and nonprofit sectors. We need a system that leverages the use of new technologies to streamline processes and enables the VA to take a more dynamic approach to respond to the needs of today's veterans. Even so, the best technology will not save a system if it is built upon outdated structures. The VA must connect its internal departments and work with DoD's to streamline services.

In 2019 IAVA will continue to monitor the implementation of the *MISSION Act*, which passed last year with the support of many in the VSO community, to include IAVA. However, IAVA has always stated that implementation of the law will require strong Congressional oversight in order to ensure that it does not turn into an expansion of privatization at the VA. 81% of IAVA members rated VA care at average or above average. Veterans like the care that they receive at the VA, and it's important to ensure that they will continue to have access to the foundational services the VA uniquely provides for our community.

3) Drive Support for Injuries from Burn Pits and Toxic Exposures

Year after year, the concern grows surrounding the health impacts of burn pits and toxic exposures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflict locations. Burn pits were a common way to get rid of waste at military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly between 2001 and 2010. There are other hazards beyond burn pits that occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan that may pose danger for respiratory illnesses, including high levels of fine dust and exposure to other airborne hazards. According to IAVA's 2019 Survey, 82% of IAVA members were exposed to burn pits



during their deployments and over 84% of those exposed believe they already have or may have symptoms.

Our members have made this clear: this issue is quickly becoming the Agent Orange of the Post-9/11 era of veterans. It is well past time that comprehensive action is taken to address the growing concern among post-9/11 veterans that these exposures have severely impacted their long term health. In fact, it's a moral failing that this has not already been holistically addressed after 18 years (and counting) of war.

In 2018, IAVA led the discussion on burn pits and other toxic exposures. We gave this issue that has been hidden for so long in veteran circles the megaphone it deserves. Registration on the VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pits registry increased by 17% in the last year alone, and currently has over 165,000 participants. From our latest Member Survey, 47% of IAVA members exposed to burn pits are registered, which is up dramatically from 35% in 2017, and only 10% in 2010. But it should not be up to IAVA and other VSOs to raise awareness of this issue. The sooner that all who were potentially exposed learn about the hazards, the sooner they can begin to receive the medical attention they deserve.

In 2018, IAVA supported the passage into law of legislation by Sens. Klobuchar and Tillis to establish a VA Center of Excellence to increase medical research on this critical issue. In 2019, IAVA will continue to drive awareness of burn pits and other airborne toxic exposures along with a growing coalition of more than two dozen VSOs, and push to pass the *Burn Pits Accountability Act* (H.R. 663/S. 191), bipartisan legislation introduced by Reps. Gabbard and Mast and Sens. Sullivan and Klobuchar, which will finally establish accountability at the Department of Defense to record exposures and increase the quantity and quality of data that can be studied by the VA and its Center of Excellence. It is a common sense first step to help the estimated 3.5 million servicemembers and veterans who may have been exposed to burn pits and other airborne toxins since 2001.

We will also continue to fight alongside those that were affected by toxic exposures in Vietnam, by working to pass the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act* (H.R. 299), a bill that would finally allow veterans who served off of the coast of Vietnam and were exposed to Agent Orange the disability payments that they deserve. IAVA is proud to stand with our Vietnam veteran friends in this fight, as they have stood with us in supporting our fight for care from toxic exposures across all eras, and into the future.

4) Continue to Defend and Expand Veterans Education Opportunities



2008 was a landmark year for the post-9/11 generation. After years of tireless advocacy by IAVA and others, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was passed into law. With it, thousands and now millions of veterans and their dependents had the doors to higher education opened for them. After deploying for years to the battlefields of Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas, Congress and the American people agreed that these warriors had earned a right to a higher education with their service.

It has now sent more than one million veterans and dependents to school, and remains one of the military's best retention and recruiting tools. In IAVA's latest Member Survey, 75% of IAVA members reported having used, that they are currently using, or plan to transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit to a family member. And 78% agree the Post-9/11 GI Bill is important to military recruitment, and 87% believe it is extremely or very important when transitioning to civilian life.

Since its inception, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has faced threats of funding cuts and abuse, which is why IAVA continues to #DefendTheGIBill. However, it has also seen unprecedented expansion. In 2017, IAVA worked with VSO partners to pass the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act*, which included numerous expansions for the GI Bill, including the elimination of the 15-year time limit to use the benefit. But the rollout of this expansion of benefits was plagued by technical issues due to a 50 year-old computer system and affected tens of thousands of service-connected students. GI Bill payments were either incorrect or did not arrive at all, forcing many veterans into financial hardships and struggling to understand when and how they would be made whole.

IAVA's RRRP team saw a significant uptick in cases during this turbulent time, fielding questions from and supporting student veterans in receiving their due benefits from the VA. For example, one veteran that reached out reporting that he had to drop a class because he couldn't afford the textbook due to lack of expected and promised payment. In addition, he now owes the VA money because of this dropped class, despite the VA's payment screw-up being to blame. Across the country, because of these unacceptable delays in payments, many veterans faced significant challenges that directly threatened their livelihood and well-being. In 2019, IAVA will continue to be a watchdog and asks Congress for continued, vigilant oversight to ensure that the technical difficulties that plagued the rollout the first time will not happen again.

5) Galvanize Support for Women Veterans and She Who Borne The Battle

In recent years, there has been a groundswell of support for women veterans' issues. From health care access to reproductive health services to a seismic culture change within the veteran community, women veterans have rightly received more attention and elevated on Capitol Hill,



inside the VA, and nationally. In 2017, IAVA launched our groundbreaking campaign, #SheWhoBorneTheBattle, focused on recognizing the service of women veterans and closing gaps in care provided to them by the VA. Ahead of the times, we made the bold choice to lead on an issue that was important to not just the 20% of our members that are women, but to our entire membership, the future of healthcare and America's national security. We fought hard for top-down culture change in the VA for the more than 345,000 women who have fought in our current wars – and for all Americans.

Women are currently the fastest growing population in both the military and veteran communities, and their numbers have been growing steadily since the 1970s. And while more women are joining the military and are finally being given unprecedented roles in combat and greater responsibilities in leadership, veteran services for them often fall behind.

While the past few years have been encouraging in the display of growing interest in ensuring health care accessibility for women veterans at VA, increasing support for women veterans, and expanding services, there is still much work to be done. As a nation we must recognize GI Jane as much as GI Joe; it is past time that the military culture and our nation embrace this, and recognize, celebrate and support the service of all veterans that serve this nation.

This year, IAVA will continue our public awareness campaign, #SheWhoBorneTheBattle, to bring a greater cultural understanding of the increasing contributions of women service members, as well as push for passage of the *Deborah Sampson Act* (S. 514) led by Sens. Tester and Boozman, into law. IAVA is encouraged by Chairman Takano's announcement and creation of a task force in the House Veterans' Affairs Committee led by Congresswoman Julia Brownley focused on women veterans. IAVA looks forward to working with her to support the passage of a compendium of bills dedicated to the support and empowerment of women veterans. We will also continue to press the Secretary of the VA, both through administrative petition and soon-to-be reintroduced legislation, to change the outdated motto of the VA to be inclusive of all who have worn the uniform.

6) Establish Support for Veterans Who Want to Utilize Medical Cannabis

The use of medical cannabis has been growing in support by the veteran population for quite some time. For years, IAVA members have sounded off in support of researching medical cannabis for the wounds of war and legalizing medical cannabis. Veterans consistently and passionately have communicated that cannabis offers effective help in tackling some of the most pressing injuries we face when returning from war. In our latest Member Survey, over 80% of IAVA members supported legalization for medical use. Across party lines, medical cannabis has



been rapidly increasing in support. Yet our national policies are outdated, research is lacking, and stigma persists.

Over the past few years, IAVA members have set out to change the national conversation around cannabis and underscore the need for bipartisan, evidence-based, common-sense solutions that can bring relief to millions, save taxpayers billions and create thousands of jobs for veterans nationwide.

In 2019, IAVA will continue our fight on behalf of veterans who want to use medicinal cannabis and we remain committed to the passage of the bipartisan *VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act* (S. 179/H.R. 712), which passed unanimously out of the House Veterans Affairs Committee in 2018. We applaud Sens. Tester, Sullivan, and Reps. Correa and Higgins for their reintroduction of this legislation and look forward to working with them in its passage.

IAVA's "Big Six" - the policy issues that I presented today - represent those that our members feel are the most pressing for our community. They're not IAVA opinion - they represent what two years of member surveys have told us. And they are also the issues that I hope the members of these committees, the President, the media, and all Americans will focus on as well. We know that they're right. And that the time to act is right now. IAVA is ready and our members are ready. We're ready to work with you to deliver results. Not just for IAVA veterans but for veterans of all generations -- those that are with us now and those that will come after us.

Members of both committees, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these issues today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and working with the Committees in the future.