

# [IAVA Calls on Congress to Fulfill Promises to Veterans](#)

*2015 veterans policy priorities announced at joint congressional hearing*

**WASHINGTON, D.C. (May 20, 2015)** – As America prepares to honor the fallen this Memorial Day, the nation’s post-9/11 veterans continue to face challenges in accessing benefits and services, according to Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). In testimony today before a joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees, IAVA CEO and Founder Paul Rieckhoff released IAVA’s four policy priorities for 2015 and outlined the hurdles faced by veterans transitioning to civilian life – from the lack of universal high-quality, timely mental health care, to barriers women veterans face in receiving care and benefits, to predatory actors in the for-profit school sector taking advantage of veterans. Additionally, IAVA called on Congress, the president and the Veterans Administration to come together to find solutions to create a customer-centric VA system, tailored to meet the needs of veterans for decades to come.

## **1. Continue Combatting Suicide Among Troops and Veterans**

On the heels of signing into law the [Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans \(SAV\) Act](#), Rieckhoff stressed the need for swift implementation of the act to provide immediate aid to both male and female veterans. While monumental, “the Clay Hunt SAV Act was only the first step toward addressing the issue of suicide. Now, the VA needs to swiftly implement the SAV Act. And Congress should continue working on next steps for a SAV Act 2.0 focused on access, support and quality,” said Rieckhoff.

The testimony comes at a critical time as the VA looks to implement the SAV Act and Congress works on legislation that would expedite services included in the Act, such as standardizing the VA drug formulary.

## **2. Invest in the Success of Women Veterans**

Rieckhoff called attention to IAVA’s nationwide survey and focus groups of female veterans in his testimony, noting that women underlined the huge challenges female veterans face accessing care from the VA. “Female vets highlighted multiple occasions where just being recognized as veterans by the VA was a challenge – receiving letters addressed to “Mr.” or having to correct their medical chart, where they were listed as male. While progress has been made, the VA (and the nation at large) is still far behind in recognizing and supporting this important population of veterans,” said Rieckhoff. IAVA called on Congress to work to: strengthen public awareness and research about women veterans; improve employment, housing and childcare benefits and services; and, improve evaluation and research on issues confronting women veterans.

In March, IAVA launched a women's veteran survey to gauge the challenges they face from a larger population of women, receiving responses from more than 1,500 women vets. The initial results showed that:

- 70 percent of respondents are enrolled in VA healthcare, and the majority have been enrolled for over two years and have sought care within the last six months;
- 70 percent of respondents rated the VA as fair, poor or very poor in their support provided to women veterans; and,
- Less than half of respondents agreed with the statement that VA employees treat women vets with respect.

### **3. Reform Government for Today's Veterans**

IAVA also called on Congress to address bipartisan reform measures within the VA, help eliminate the backlog, and increase access to quality health care for veterans injured in the line of duty. To this end, IAVA is supporting Chairman Jeff Miller's (R-Fla.) VA Accountability Act (H.R. 1994), which will give Secretary McDonald greater flexibility in enacting reforms across the VA.

Recognizing that the VA has improved and continues to strive forward in its mission since Secretary McDonald has been on the job, Rieckhoff acknowledged that challenges still exist. As a result, "funding and key structures at the VA in particular must be protected from short-sighted cuts and political posturing. This must be the year we all work together to create a veteran-centric system that is tailored to meet our needs for decades to come," Rieckhoff testified.

### **4. Defend Veteran and Military Education Benefits**

Finally, Rieckhoff noted that while the landmark Post-9/11 GI Bill has sent more than one million veterans to school, predatory actors in the for-profit school sector put veterans at risk. "Congress must finally close the loopholes that reward those who target veterans. You must also strengthen regulations to help veterans choose the best educational program for their career goals. And, ensure the success of veterans once they're on campus," Rieckhoff said.

To support its policy agenda, IAVA will continue aggressive advocacy on the Hill and galvanize the more than 2.5 million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to grassroots action with their local lawmakers and congressional leaders.

A full copy of Rieckhoff's testimony can be found here <http://bit.ly/1FmoPut>.