



**Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America's
Local Policy Recommendations
for New York City**

October, 2014



Summary of Recommendations

Combat Suicide and Support Mental Health Initiatives

- Promote, Support and Fund IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP)
- Integrate VA and DoD Suicide Prevention Efforts with City Services
- Encourage Council District Discretionary Funds be Spent on Community-Based Mental Health Programs and Non-Profit Programs
- Build on the Recent Veterans Mental Health Care Initiative
- Train Local First Responders in the Best Practices to Support Veterans in Crisis
- Launch a City Awareness Campaign to Combat the Stigma of Seeking Help

Strengthen NYC Government for Today's Veterans

- Establish a Department of Veterans Affairs for New York City
- Establish Veterans' Treatment Courts in All 5 Boroughs
- Fund the NYC Veterans Resource Center Initiative
- Develop a City Resource Directory
- Collect Basic Contact Information for Veterans at Social Services
- Train Probation Officers on Veterans' Benefits

Defend Military and Veteran Education Benefits

- Aggressively Investigate Predatory For-Profit Schools
- Grant All Student Veterans Residency Status for the Purpose of Receiving In-State Tuition at all CUNY System Schools
- Provide Support to Nonprofits Helping Veterans Achieve their Educational Goals
- Grant Tax Credits to Military Spouses to Pursue Higher Education

Employ the New Greatest Generation

- Establish City Preference Laws for Contracting
- Include Veterans in City Employment Emphasis Programs
- Develop Veteran Services in the City's Department of Small Business Services (SBS)
- Recognize Military Experience For Credentialing and Licensing Requirements
- Targeted Tax Relief for Small Businesses Owned by Deployed Guard and Reservists

Support for Veterans and Their Families

- Educate School Administrators and Teachers on the Unique Challenges of Military Children
- Update New York City Housing Authority Regulations to Include Iraq and Afghanistan Conflicts
- Mayoral Participation at Veteran Events in New York City



Overview

With nearly 200,000 veterans estimated to be living in New York City, the role of the city's government is crucial to the implementation and development of benefits and services that will directly improve the lives of veterans and their families. Additionally, with new leadership at the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) and an emerging drive to establish a new city department specifically for veterans' affairs, New York City is in a unique position to become a municipal leader on veterans' issues. As the largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) supports the policy recommendations included in this document as a means to develop a comprehensive policy plan for New York City and its veterans.

Combat Suicide and Support Mental Health Initiatives

Combating suicide is one of the most important issues to IAVA's members and it must be a priority of the entire American public. In IAVA's 2014 member survey, 47 percent of respondents reported they knew a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan who had attempted suicide. Over 40 percent knew a new veteran who had died by suicide, and many of these respondents knew more than one. Nationwide, the suicide rate among troops and veterans is staggering – recent VA data suggests that 22 veterans die by suicide each day.

Lowering the rate of suicide among troops and veterans will take a comprehensive approach and often, the New York City government is on the front lines. The New York City government can be a critical partner in the fight to combat suicide by adopting these policy initiatives.

- **Promote, Support and Fund IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP):** IAVA's RRRP is a dedicated, professional, centralized resource that connects with best-in-class programs and benefits to assist with a multitude of issues veterans face including mental health support, homelessness, financial hardship and employment services. Maintenance and expansion of this vital referral program is dependent upon the promotion, support and funding that the NYC Council can provide. In an environment where veterans are presented with an overwhelming array of programs and benefits, IAVA's RRRP serves a hub that ensures veterans are connecting with the best services in a seamless manner and that post-crisis follow-up is always conducted to ensure the veteran's continued success.
- **Integrate VA and DoD Suicide Prevention Efforts with City Services:** Local services and hotlines, like 311, can often be the first stop for veterans seeking mental health services. The New York City government can help ensure fewer veterans slip through the cracks between services by integrating VA, DoD, and non-profit resources into local and municipal one-stop shops.
- **Encourage Council District Discretionary Funds be Spent on Community-Based Mental Health Programs and Non-Profit Programs:** Community-based mental health programs can be an effective tool in improving the suicide prevention and mental health resources available to veterans. The City Council districts could use their discretionary funds to support effective community-based mental health programs aimed at assisting veterans and their families.
- **Build on the Recent Veterans Mental Health Care Initiative:** The portion of the \$400,000 veterans initiative funds set aside for increasing access to mental health care was a positive investment into improving services for veterans. Allocating specific funds to improve the mental health care services available to veterans should continue to be a priority of the City.
- **Train Local First Responders in the Best Practices to Support Veterans in Crisis:** City first responders, like EMTs and police officers, are often the first people on the scene when a veteran is in crisis. City officials can help improve care by ensuring first-responders are always given military mental health first-aid training.



- **Launch a City Awareness Campaign to Combat the Stigma of Seeking Help for Combat Stress Injuries:** Every community can have an immense impact on suicide if it fosters an environment where more people understand common mental health injuries and which encourages more veterans to seek care. According to IAVA's 2014 member survey, an encouraging 77 percent of respondents sought care when it was suggested that they do so by a friend or family member. New York City can help equip the community to better support veterans with mental health injuries by launching a local awareness campaign to combat the stigma of seeking help for combat stress injuries.

Strengthen NYC Government for Today's Veterans

The system required by today's veterans – whether they served in Vietnam or Iraq and Afghanistan – will be very different from the legacy system. With only 22,691 Post-9/11 veterans estimated to be living in New York City, this generation of veterans makes up a small percentage of the total city population, and the changing demographics of new veterans will require a nimble, dynamic system of care that can predict the needs of veterans and respond quickly. Today's veterans envision a system of care designed with the same entrepreneurial spirit required of them during their service. Standing on ceremony or hiding behind process cannot stand. Success must be measured by results, rather than by the number of new programs or initiatives created.

- **Establish a Department of Veterans Affairs for New York City.** Due to limitations, specifically budgetary limitations, the current Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs has limited effectiveness. Establishing a Department of Veterans Affairs within the New York City government will allow for more support services, benefits, and initiatives that will improve the lives of veterans.
- **Establish Veterans Treatment Courts in All 5 Boroughs:** Veterans Courts provide enormous benefits both for veterans and the community. Those convicted through a Veterans Treatment Court are put through a rehabilitative program that often includes mental health support, and avoid criminal sentences if they meet the requirements of the program.
- **Fund the NYC Veterans Resource Center Initiative:** The NYC Veterans Resource Centers were beneficial programs that provided front-line, comprehensive services to veterans and their families. Funding for these centers ended in 2010, but funding should be reestablished in order to ensure that quality veteran services are being provided across the city.
- **Develop a City Resource Directory:** With a changing veteran population, it is critical that New York City catalogue and promote the local resources available to veterans in the area. This catalogue should be integrated in to all municipal one-stops and be made available to national organizations to help local members find resources.
- **Collect Basic Contact Information for Veterans at Social Services:** New veterans are returning home to New York City in large numbers, but many are not turning to the VA for services. In fact, just under half of all veterans are registered with the VA. As a result, outreach to veterans is made difficult. By collecting basic contact information (e.g., phone number, address, and email), city services can be better equipped to assist veterans.
- **Train Probation Officers on Veterans' Benefits:** The creation and success of Veterans Treatment Courts is a recent phenomenon. Unfortunately, too many vets have been incarcerated with combat-related mental health injuries. After release, the VA and city non-profits have resources that can help vets reintegrate into society and get treatment that they may need but were not able to get in prison.



Defend Military and Veteran Education Benefits

In 2013, the one-millionth new veteran went to school on the Post-9/11 GI Bill, realizing many of the hopes that IAVA and partner organizations had when working to pass this historic benefit. Yet, far too many barriers remain to ensure that this generation gets the most out of this historic benefit. Too many veterans are falling prey to predatory for-profit schools who see veterans as dollar signs in uniform. Additionally, structural barriers within the public education system are preventing veterans from making the most of the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

- **Aggressively Investigate Predatory For-Profit Schools:** Veterans are often the targets of predatory for-profit schools. The city government is poised to be at the forefront of ensuring that predatory for-profit schools do not take advantage of veterans by encouraging investigations of the bad apples. New York City should also engage in an aggressive consumer education campaign to help student veterans make sound choices with their benefits.
- **Grant all Student Vets Residency Status for the Purpose of Receiving In-State Tuition at all CUNY System Schools:** The CUNY school system educates students who can in turn provide both economic and employment investments back into the city. Granting in-state residency status to all veterans seeking an education at a CUNY school will allow all veterans to contribute to this investment without the burden of large out-of-state expenses.
- **Provide Support to Nonprofits Providing Services to Help Vets Achieve their Educational Goals:** Success for student veterans often involves a community to help navigate their new environment and develop goals for civilian life, especially in New York City. Local nonprofits can help by developing city-focused services that fill in the gaps.
- **Require CUNY System Schools to Reimburse Tuition for Students Who Deployed Mid-Academic Term:** Many veterans use their GI Bill while still serving in the National Guard or Reserves where deployments may be sudden. The CUNY system should implement a no-harm policy for veterans who are deployed in the middle of an academic term and cannot complete their course work as a result. All tuition should be refunded and veterans should be allowed to drop their course load with no adverse consequences.
- **Grant Tax Credits to Military Spouses to Pursue Higher Education:** Military service often makes pursuing a career difficult for many military spouses. Education benefits can help spouses pursue new career opportunities or fulfill licensure requirements demanded by the laws of their new home state.

Employ the New Greatest Generation

The unemployment rate for new vets continues to drop as the economy improves, but the unemployment numbers among veterans in New York City is still slightly higher than the national average. Additionally, despite the significant investments of the public and private sectors, there are many structural barriers to finding meaningful work after leaving the military. Addressing the legal and cultural barriers that prevent many veterans from smoothly transitioning from combat to career will be the long-term solution to keeping veterans from being one economic downturn away from skyrocketing unemployment.

- **Establish City Preference Laws for Contracting:** Currently, New York state requires six percent of contracts be awarded to veteran-owned businesses. This requirement is common in other states and major cities and New York City should implement similar requirements to encourage the development of veteran-owned businesses within New York City.
- **Include Veterans in City Employment Emphasis Programs:** Currently, New York City employment emphasis programs provide services to women and minorities, but not veterans. These programs would provide meaningful services for veterans and would help address the unemployment rate among New York City's veteran population.
- **Develop Veteran Services in the City's Department of Small Business Services (SBS):** Nationally, about 6 percent of IAVA's annual membership survey respondents already own a small business and 20 percent plan to



start their own business. With a robust economy in New York City, there is ample opportunity for veterans to become small business owners. The city's SBS should develop programs to assist veterans aiming to start a small business in New York City.

- **Recognize Military Experience For Credentialing and Licensing Requirements:** Translating military skills into their civilian equivalents continues to be one of the most significant barriers to veteran employment. While dedicated companies are working to translate military professions into the civilian equivalent, there remains little official translation at the municipal level for licenses or certifications.
- **Targeted Tax Relief for Small Businesses Owned by Deployed Guard and Reservists:** For veteran business owners who continue to serve in the National Guard and Reserves, deployments can put a significant burden on their businesses. Targeted, city-specific tax relief can help veteran owned small businesses stay afloat while their principal is serving his or her country abroad.

Support for Veterans and Their Families

Veterans and their families face a unique set of challenges due to military service. New York City should implement policies that reflect the unique needs of this community and publicly recognize veterans and military families at every available opportunity.

- **Educate School Administrators and Teachers on the Unique Challenges of Military Children:** When a service member deploys, their families serve alongside them, and some children of troops and veterans face unique challenges as a result of their family's service. By educating teachers and school administrators on common signs of distress and on existing resources, more military children can get the support they need as they grapple with the ups and downs of military family life.
- **Update New York City Housing Authority Regulations to Include Iraq and Afghanistan Conflicts:** The New York City Housing Authority regulations provide for preferential housing assignments for veterans or family members of veterans who were either injured or killed during the Vietnam War. The law should be updated to include the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to provide similar preferential services for the City's newest veterans.
- **Mayoral and Council Participation at Veteran Events in New York City:** The Mayor and City Council Members should look for every opportunity to engage and interact with new veterans in substantive ways in person. This way, they can learn first-hand about veterans' challenges and struggles and stay ahead of the curve in picking up on trends in the City's veteran community. The following events are potential opportunities for City officials to meet, interact with, and hear directly from local IAVA member veterans.

Monthly Events:

IAVA VetTogethers – Held in the IAVA's NYC office on or around the 11th of every month.

Annual Events:

November 11, 2014 – NYC Veterans Day Parade

November 13, 2014 – IAVA Annual Gala in NYC

May 25, 2015 – Memorial Day Wreath Laying Ceremony at the Intrepid Museum