



**Statement of Hannah Sinoway**  
**Chief Services Officer**  
*of*  
**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America**  
*before the*  
**New York City Council Committee on Veterans**

**December 13, 2018**

Chairman Deutsch and Distinguished Members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on the pending legislation before the New York City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Hannah Sinoway, the Chief Services Officer with IAVA's Rapid Response Referral Program, or "RRRP" for short. RRRP is IAVA's high-tech, high-touch referral service for veterans and their families with a complete and comprehensive case management component. To date, RRRP has served over 9,000 veterans and family members and over 1,000 veterans and family members in NYC alone, providing critical support and resources to ensure this city's veteran's needs are effectively met.

After fourteen years, IAVA has become the preferred empowerment organization for post-9/11 veterans. While our members are spread throughout the nation, we are proud to say that our national headquarters is located in New York City. Since its beginning, IAVA has fought for and has been successful in advocating for policies that are able to meet the needs of our newest generation of veterans, which includes our advocacy towards the creation and proper funding of the DVS.

Defending the GI Bill is an extremely important part of our work and is highlighted in our Big Six priorities for 2018. According to our most recent member survey, the Post-9/11 GI Bill is an extremely popular program; 90% of our members have used, plan to use, or have transferred the benefit to a qualifying dependent. Out of the vast amount of our members that have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill, 74% said that they had 'Good' or 'Excellent' experiences.

IAVA led the charge in 2008 to pass the first Post-9/11 GI Bill; our leadership in 2008 to spearhead this landmark legislation was extremely important. For the next decade, IAVA fought for and defended the Post-9/11 GI Bill: from advocating for the *Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Improvements Act* passed in 2010 to defend the GI Bill against cuts and taxes in 2016 and 2017, and passing sweeping new improvements to the benefit in the *Harry W. Colmery*



*Veterans Educational Assistance Act* - otherwise known as the “Forever GI Bill.” Additionally, 88% of IAVA’s members believe that the Post-9/11 GI Bill is either ‘Extremely Important’ or ‘Important’ to transitioning servicemembers and almost 90% oppose any cuts to the benefit, which is why IAVA’s continued effort to Defend the GI Bill from cuts, waste, and abuse will last long into the future.

In August 2017, with the backing of IAVA and many other Veteran Service Organizations, the *Colmery Act* was signed into law, marking one of the largest expansions of veteran educational benefits since the original GI Bill in 1944. This expansion created a need for updated IT infrastructure within the VA to address new provisions in the law, such as modified Monthly Housing Allowance (MHA) payments. According to the legislation, the VA had a deadline of August 1, 2018 - one full year after passage - to implement these changes, and as of this hearing, the VA has yet to do so.

On October 10, well into the Fall semester, the VA publicly acknowledged longer than normal processing times on their website and gave instructions for students who were experiencing financial hardships, such as falling behind on rent, utilities, or other important bills. This left students with no official explanation as to why they were unable to receive their benefits for nearly two months. The VA also left students with no timeline of when they would realistically be able to expect MHA payments, leaving students unable to properly plan their finances and adding undue stress to their semesters.

On November 15, the VA testified in front of the House Veterans Affairs Committee on these pressing issues, but Representatives of both parties didn’t appear to get the answers they were looking for. Since then the VA has decided to delay implementing the revised MHA under the *Colmery Act* until the Spring of 2020. Until then, student veterans will continue to be paid under the old MHA rates while the VA works to upgrade their IT infrastructure to comply with the new law. While this will allow student veterans and their schools to receive their MHA payments, a group of student veterans will remain underpaid by the law. The VA has promised to make those payments whole when their new IT systems are online in 2020. IAVA remains committed to ensuring all student veterans receive proper GI Bill payments and will continue to remain vigilant on this important issue.

In the past couple of weeks our Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP) has received more than 20 inquiries from veterans reaching out reporting that due to lack of GI Bill payments, they are now facing serious financial crisis, including eviction, lack of food and clothing, transportation challenges, and utility shut-offs. One veteran 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



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VA's payment issues being to blame. Across the country because of these delays in payments, many veterans are now facing significant challenges that directly threaten their livelihood and well-being.

As we head into the Spring Semester we ask the DVS to be extra vigilant for student veterans facing financial distress. While the VA has worked to clear delayed payments, the entire community needs to remain alert to ensure that this problem does not repeat in the future. DVS needs to be aware of this issue and ready to assist veterans that may be in financial hardship due to delayed GI Bill payments.

Members of the Committee, 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.