



**Statement of Melissa Bryant**  
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*of*  
**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**  
*before the*  
**National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service**

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Members of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (“the Commission”), on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members worldwide, thank you for the opportunity to share our views, data, and experiences on the matter of improving basic hiring processes within federal government. As an organization that represents service members in the Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard, as well as many veterans who have transitioned from military to civil service, we appreciate the opportunity to address challenges within current civil service personnel systems and discuss options to bring the next generation of talented Americans to public service.

I am here today not only as IAVA’s Chief Policy Officer, but also as a former Army Captain and a combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was a military intelligence officer who led women and men in combat; upon my honorable discharge from the military, it felt natural to me to continue my career as an intelligence officer at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), where I became a recognized expert in partner engagement. I forged successful interagency collaborations with counterparts to develop multinational policy. I have also spearheaded work with diverse teams of U.S. and foreign partners to capture lessons learned from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and replicate best practices. Routinely, I facilitated senior executive information exchanges and working groups that developed plans and strategies, as well as built consensus in support of U.S. defense and intelligence policy in the Pentagon. I brought this depth of subject matter expertise with me in my current role with IAVA, which landed me before the Commission today. I believe my story is one of successful transition from the military into civil service and beyond. But this is often not the case for our nation’s veterans.

Veteran and military family stability, transition and employment are an incredibly important part of IAVA’s work; it is a key policy area included in our [Policy Agenda for the 116th Congress](#). When service members transition out of the military, most struggle with pairing military skills to related civilian careers and with transferring military licensure and formal



accreditation to the civilian world. Because of this, many veterans report that potential employers do not understand the value they bring to their companies and organizations. Veteran unemployment was recently well above the national average. While it has dropped, there are still significant concerns about long-term career success and underemployment in the veteran population.

According to [IAVA's last member survey](#), which surveyed members of the post-9/11 generation of veterans, 37 percent of respondents felt underemployed. The ability to translate military skills for civilian use is the third most important factor, behind salary and finding meaning in their work, that our members look at when job hunting. It is in the country's best interest to better allow for what IAVA calls "the Next Greatest Generation" to continue to serve this country in the civil service. Veterans and military spouses who have jobs in their preferred career field do better work and remain in those jobs for longer.

### **Veterans in the Federal Workforce**

According to the Department of Labor, as of 2018, post-9/11 veterans are **twice as likely to work in the public sector**, compared to their civilian counterparts --26 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Among the employed, 14 percent of post-9/11 veterans worked for the federal government, compared with just 2 percent of non-veterans according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). **Veterans now represent approximately one-third (31.1 percent)** of the total U.S. Federal workforce, marking a five percentage point rise since the Hire Vets initiative was implemented in 2009. In addition to the Hire Vets initiative, the Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Labor (DOL) have created a [Veterans Employment Toolkit](#) and [Veteran Hiring Toolkit](#), respectively, to aid employers in hiring and retaining veteran employees.

Many veterans with a service-connected disability work in the public sector. In August 2018, **32 percent of employed veterans with a disability worked in federal, state, or local government**, compared with 18 percent of veterans with no disability and 13 percent of nonveterans. This is an incredibly important figure, as 18 years of war has left many veterans with injuries related to their combat exposure. Employment is a meaningful and valuable tool in reintegrating into the civilian world and can give Soldiers, Marines, Airmen and Sailors a sense of purpose after taking off the uniform. Ensuring that all veterans, including those with the signature injuries of war, are able to live a full life must include a discussion around employment. The fact that so many disabled veterans have a pathway to livelihood through federal employment is key to ensuring the long term success of all veterans.



The retention rates for veterans are encouraging as well, with many agencies retaining newly hired veterans at rates nearly on par with their non-veteran employees according to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). And the Departments of Defense (DoD), Transportation (DOT), and VA have the highest percentages of veterans, with Department of Energy (DOE) and OPM shortly behind (full chart below, from OPM). In many ways, DoD and VA seem like the most obvious pathway to federal employment for most veterans, however the high percentage of veterans in DOT, DOE, and OPM illustrate that many military specialties translate into the civilian sector in a variety of ways; some of which may not seem self-evident from the civilian perspective. Closing the civilian-military divide begins with the understanding that the military war fighters include truck drivers, human resources managers, scientists, medics, and so many more occupational specialties that translate directly into civilian service. In addition, the leadership, organizational and operational skills developed during military service translate exceptionally well into any civilian job environment..

### Total On-Board Employees — All Veterans

	FY 2016			FY 2017		
	All Employees	Veterans	%	All Employees	Veterans	%
<b>Total Executive Branch Agencies</b>	<b>2,042,669</b>	<b>635,556</b>	<b>31.1%</b>	<b>2,034,269</b>	<b>633,386</b>	<b>31.1%</b>
<b>Executive Order Agencies</b>						
Agriculture	96,591	12,480	12.9%	93,401	12,226	13.1%
Commerce	46,046	5,636	12.2%	47,704	5,715	12.0%
Defense	687,435	326,529	47.5%	681,529	324,253	47.6%
Air Force	146,175	83,455	57.1%	144,844	82,837	57.2%
Army	223,244	112,040	50.2%	221,028	111,563	50.5%
Navy	206,679	89,490	43.3%	206,071	88,867	43.1%
Defense Activities	111,337	41,544	37.3%	109,586	40,986	37.4%
Education	4,362	475	10.9%	4,059	464	11.4%
Energy	15,153	3,712	24.5%	14,762	3,693	25.0%
HHS	86,552	6,476	7.5%	84,822	6,387	7.5%
Homeland Security	191,644	53,126	27.7%	198,399	54,296	27.4%
HUD	8,061	1,272	15.8%	7,827	1,261	16.1%
Interior	71,057	12,127	17.1%	68,275	11,909	17.4%
Justice	117,127	29,246	25.0%	115,976	28,509	24.6%
Labor	15,766	3,473	22.0%	15,016	3,335	22.2%
State	13,126	2,743	20.9%	12,301	2,583	21.0%
Transportation	55,172	20,249	36.7%	54,748	20,093	36.7%
Treasury	92,109	10,203	11.1%	87,676	9,745	11.1%
Veterans Affairs	373,149	122,305	32.8%	381,457	123,608	32.4%
AID	1,733	251	14.5%	1,583	229	14.5%
EPA	15,634	1,364	8.7%	15,058	1,346	8.9%
GSA	11,552	2,571	22.3%	11,498	2,658	23.1%



NASA	17,251	2,078	12.0%	17,189	2,094	12.2%
NSF	1,455	123	8.5%	1,479	124	8.4%
OPM	5,358	1,413	26.4%	5,506	1,517	27.6%
NRC*	3,521	735	20.9%	3,228	667	20.7%
SSA	64,394	10,478	16.3%	62,297	10,252	16.5%
SBA	4,119	720	17.5%	5,249	776	14.8%
<b>Total Executive Order Agencies</b>	<b>1,998,367</b>	<b>629,785</b>	<b>31.5%</b>	<b>1,991,039</b>	<b>627,740</b>	<b>31.5%</b>

### **Post-9/11 Veterans Employment**

Thanks to the advocacy of IAVA and other organizations, employers are starting to understand that the unwavering work ethic developed by veterans during their military service is an invaluable asset to any company and its community. Recently, BLS [reported](#) post-9/11 veteran unemployment rates were 2.3 percent for April 2019. This is significant -- at its highest, unemployment for post-9/11 vets reached 15 percent during January 2011. Overall, unemployment among post-9/11 veterans continues to fall.

As the leading organization representing the post-9/11 generation, we have a unique view on the challenges impacting members of the post-9/11 generation when it comes to employment. In addition to the 37 percent of IAVA members who reported being underemployed, 5 percent of IAVA members reported being unemployed and looking for work, the lowest unemployment rate IAVA has seen in its post-9/11 membership to date. Our membership consistently indicates employment as one of the top three challenges they encounter when transitioning from the military. In fact, 2 out of 3 veterans we surveyed did not have a job as they transitioned out of the military. One of the largest and most significant barriers to veteran employment is not only pairing military skills to relevant civilian careers but also licensure and formal accreditation. Almost 70 percent of IAVA members didn't have a job secured when they left the military, and 60 percent felt that they did not receive proper support for transitioning to the civilian workforce. Many veterans report that business leaders and various institutions (to include the federal government, outside of VA and DoD) simply do not understand the value they bring to their companies and organizations.

### **Women Veterans and Spouses are Disproportionately Impacted**

Women veterans tend to have a higher unemployment rate than male veterans. However, there are positive trends for women veterans, where in all age groups, were more likely to be employed, work full-time, year-round, work in the government, and have higher median earnings



than their non-veteran counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Employed post-9/11 women veterans are also more likely in a management or professional role than the employed women non-veterans.<sup>2</sup>

But there are further demographic challenges our research team identified in IAVA's survey. Women respondents to our survey who indicated good health were 8.4 percent less likely to report being unemployed than women with average health, possibly speaking to the impact of service-connected disabilities. Women veterans from the Navy were 9.3 percent more likely to report unemployment than Army veterans. Black women veterans were significantly less likely to report as many challenges transitioning as white women veterans, perhaps suggesting a demographic "settling" for lesser paying jobs. Women aged 65 and older were significantly less likely to report as many challenges transitioning than women aged 31-45, which is in line with the age gap noted in previous memos and hearing by the Commission.

According to the latest DOD survey, servicewomen are more likely to marry a fellow service member, meaning many are not only service members and women veterans but also military spouses. And a recent survey of military spouses by Blue Star Families found that nearly 80 percent of military family respondents felt being a military spouse hurt their ability to pursue a career. Often required to move because of their service, military spouses can confront challenges in finding a new job or transferring licenses and certifications to continue their careers in their new homes.

There is one semi-bright data point to glean from: women veterans who attended trade or vocational schools were significantly less likely to report challenges transitioning than women with bachelor's degrees, suggesting use of the post-9/11 GI Bill benefit expansion to attend non-bachelor's degree producing programs and apprenticeships has been a useful tool.

### **Recommendations for the Commission**

In order to remedy some of the challenges expressed by our community, IAVA concurs with many of the recommendations of [the Commission's Staff Memorandum: Public Service](#) as means for easing and promoting military transition and spouse recruitment into civil service:

- Modernizing recruiting and application processes
- Improving candidate qualification and assessment, particularly involving subject matter experts who can evaluate comparative skills sets between military and civil service

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<sup>1</sup> <https://census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/acs/acsbr15-03.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Post\\_911\\_Veterans\\_Profile\\_2015.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/Post_911_Veterans_Profile_2015.pdf)





- Streamlining and enhancing the use of noncompetitive hiring for fellowship and scholarship recipients, national service alumni, veterans, and military spouses
- Expanding noncompetitive eligibility for students, interns, fellows, veterans, and national service alumni by extending eligibility for Veterans Recruitment Appointment from three years to 10 years after discharge
- Modernizing veterans' preference to provide opportunities for veterans—especially those recently discharged from the military who are transitioning to civilian employment—to best match their skills and experience with federal workforce needs
- Building a workforce pipeline from higher education to public service, especially using the post-9/11 GI Bill as a pathway to hone skill sets learned in the military
- Pilot a program to develop a pathway for veterans to become physician assistants at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

In addition to the above, IAVA includes the following recommendations to the Commission from our Policy Agenda for the 116th Congress:

- Mandate implementation of licensing reimbursement for military spouses and invest in advertising this benefit
- Ensure seats are available for military spouses to attend DoD's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) courses, and encourage their participation
- Develop a special track of TAP for military families
- Establish best practices for recruiting, hiring and employing veterans that can be disseminated and adopted by all public agencies
- Establish best practices for the recruitment, hiring, and employment of military spouses that emphasize the importance of flexibility and military cultural competency
- Train human resource professionals, either through nonprofits or through DOL, on the unique experiences of servicemembers and their families

Thank you for allowing IAVA to share our views. I look forward to working with the Commission to continue to improve basic hiring practice and other employment challenges for military veterans who seek to further their public service discussed in this testimony.