



**Statement of Allison Jaslow**  
**Chief of Staff**  
*of*  
**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**  
*before the*  
**House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees**

**March 22, 2017**

Chairman Isakson, Chairman Roe, Ranking Members Tester and Walz, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 400,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our policy priorities for 2017, including our “Big Four”: Improve Services for Women Veterans, Fully Recognize and Defend Veteran and Military Education Benefits, Reform Government for Veterans, and Continue to Combat Suicide Among Troops and Veterans.

For thirteen years, IAVA has been the preferred empowerment organization for post-9/11 veterans. Since its beginning IAVA has fought for and has been successful in advocating for beneficial policies that meet the needs of today’s veteran.

Much like Veteran Service Organizations who have previously had their own individual platform on which to testify before this Joint Committee, I ask that going forward, IAVA be afforded the same opportunity, thus allowing for a more thorough discussion of the priorities of post-9/11 veterans outlined in IAVA’s Policy Agenda.

We now have a new administration and a new Congress. In this new dynamic, we ask that you be our champions and that you continue the good work that has been done on behalf of our community, and also to better address the post-9/11 veteran issues that have not been given the attention that they deserve. IAVA hopes to be your partner and we encourage you to focus on the top priorities facing today’s veterans, including the following issues important to our members.

**Fully Recognize the Service of and Improve Services for Women Veterans**

Women are now the fastest growing population in both the military and veteran communities. They make up over 20 percent of IAVA membership and 35 percent of our leadership. Nearly 350,000 women have deployed since 2001, and they continue to



serve in critical roles around the world today. In 2001, women were estimated to make up about six percent of the veteran population. By 2020, it is estimated they will represent 11 percent.

Yet, while women have played a critical role in the military throughout history, their contributions continue to be overlooked. The stories abound - women veterans who are met with disbelief when they share the fact that they served. A woman who parks in a spot saved for military is challenged by a stranger as to why she parked there. Another who checks into the VA hospital is asked whose dependent she is. And yet still another, who while on Capitol Hill advocating for vets, is thanked for her support while the male veterans with her are thanked for their service.

The vast majority of our women members do not feel the American public recognizes their service and sacrifice. Only 27 percent of IAVA women veterans who responded to our 2017 member survey felt that the general public treat women in the military with respect. These women have made it clear that there is a severe gap in understanding in who it is that actually makes up our military force. This must change.

This gap extends beyond the general public, including the veteran community itself. In IAVA's survey of 1,500 women veterans, only 30% rated the support the VA gave women as good or very good, and less than half felt that VA staff treated women veterans with respect or had a culture welcoming to women - that's appalling.

While women have served on the front lines, the Department of Defense (DoD) only recently officially opened combat posts to women - a move that IAVA strongly supported. More women will lead our military in the years to come and it is past time that the military culture embrace that and that the services promised to *all* veterans embody that.

A big step in this direction can be made with the VA's motto, "*To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.*" That is the first thing a woman veteran sees when she walks into a VA facility... for HIM who shall have borne the battle. That is not the message we want to send the women who have served this nation. Updating this motto to include all who have served is the first step to making this right. It is necessary to update the motto to reflect the increasing number of women veterans utilizing the VA and the inclusive nature of services available to all. According to our 2017 member survey, the majority of survey participants support this change.

The VA has made great progress over the last decade improving services for women, but they are still struggling to provide comprehensive, quality care to women. Historically, women veterans have higher higher rates of unemployment and are more at risk for experiencing homelessness than their male veteran counterparts. They are also dying by suicide at six times the rate of their civilian counterparts. This is a brutal wake up call that we need to do better.



Among our top recommendations for improving services, IAVA calls on Congress to establish peer support programs, require improved training and support for primary care physicians and program managers, create a centralized website that consolidates information for women vets, conduct outreach, and improve VA's ability to meet needs of female amputees.

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

After sacrificing years of their lives to protect our freedom, our veterans have earned the right to obtain a high-quality, affordable education with the help of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which IAVA fought hard to establish. Among IAVA's own members surveyed earlier this year, 40% said they have used it themselves, 11% transferred it to their dependents, and 24% intend to use it. For those who have used it, satisfaction ratings are high. Our members also largely agree that this is a critical benefit for recruitment to the military and transition upon leaving.

Last year's attempts by Congress to use the GI Bill as a piggy bank to fund other veterans programs is abhorrent to the nearly 90% of IAVA member survey participants who oppose such a move. While there were many initiatives in the House and Senate bills that by themselves we had supported, the \$4 billion in cuts proposed would have been a serious breach in trust with our military. IAVA responded, and with the help of our friends in Congress and our members, we defeated these wrong-headed designs on our benefits. Congress received more than 33,000 letters from our members in opposition to these proposals - that and our new survey results are a powerful indicator that post-9/11 veterans will hold accountable anyone who adds their name to such an effort in the future.

Another matter that has come to light recently is an unfortunate situation where some reservists and National Guard members are being deployed on orders that preclude their active duty mobilization time from being counted toward eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill. One example of these types of situations are reservists and Guard members who are mobilized under 12304b orders and are not provided with the same GI Bill benefits as other servicemembers. We ask that Congress make the necessary corrections to ensure that our servicemembers are treated equally.

Finally, Congress must finally close the 90/10 loophole that rewards schools for targeting veterans. Although only one-third of veterans enrolled at for-profit schools, this sector accounted for 40 percent—more than \$8 billion—in overall tuition payments for veterans and their dependents through FY 2014.

While not every for-profit college is a bad actor, and closing the 90/10 loophole is not the only solution, it is a significant step Congress should take to improve education outcomes for veterans. Congress has a responsibility to protect our veterans from bad actors and to protect taxpayers' investment.



We must continue to work together to protect, improve and celebrate this benefit that has sent over 1.5 million post-9/11 veterans and their dependents to school.

### **Reform the VA and DOD for Today's Veterans**

The VA scandals in recent years brought to light problems that veterans of all generations face in trying to get their hard earned benefits and care from the VA: a negligent log jam of claims and overdue health care. The crisis was preventable and it is absolutely fixable. Eighty percent of respondents to our most recent member survey are enrolled in VA health care. While many praise the care they've received, others have had their challenges. In the last two years, the VA has made strides toward embracing a culture of innovation and collaboration, and this must continue under the new Administration.

The secretaries at the VA and DoD must be given the resources, authority and space to succeed - while being held accountable. At the very least, funding and key structures at the VA must be protected from short-sighted cuts and political posturing.

This must be the year we all work together to create a dynamic, responsive, integrative system with the veteran at its core that is set to meet every veteran's needs for decades to come. Today, veterans too often feel like they are fighting the government for the services and benefits they have earned; a successful system of care will fight for them. Our military is the world's most advanced; our care for our veterans must be the same.

While a vast majority of VA employees serve veterans in an exemplary way, and many are veterans themselves, there are also those who discredit the VA through underperforming or negligent acts. Being able to jettison those employees in an expedited manner that also protects the whistleblower while recruiting and retaining the type of talent that will ensure VA's success is key to restoring VA morale and providing the veteran with the highest quality and most timely care possible.

After post-9/11 veterans demanded action, IAVA worked hard to pass two major accountability bills sponsored by former Chairman Jeff Miller in the 114th Congress, and although the House easily passed them, the Senate failed to act. IAVA calls on Congress to bridge the partisan divide and work now to pass a strong accountability bill that can be passed by the Senate and signed into law. We owe Secretary Shulkin the tools and leeway to ensure his Department has the right people on the job for vets.

### ***Appeals Backlog***

Further, the VA, with Congress' support, must also eliminate the appeals backlog. Even before the VA health system scandal, IAVA underscored the urgency of addressing the VA claims backlog that at its peak was over 600,000 in 2013. This number has been greatly reduced since then, but in the process a backlog of appeals has developed.



While around 75,000 appeals awaited adjudication in 2013, that number had risen to more than 400,000 at the end of 2016. IAVA calls on Congress to pass an appeals modernization bill this year.

Additionally, funding and key structures at VA in particular **MUST** be protected from short-sighted cuts and political posturing. We must all work together to create a veteran-centric system that is tailored to meet our needs for decades to come.

### ***VA Health Care Reform***

The VA health care system is not perfect, but it is also not all broken. VA health care holds competencies that are unmatched in the civilian health sector. IAVA holds firm that the best solution for veterans is a VA that combines the best of what the VA has to offer with the best from the private sector; an integrated network of care in which VA is at the center, coordinating care while offering the services it best delivers.

Talk of dismantling the VA system is extremely unpopular among veterans, including IAVA members. In fact, data suggests that often when given a choice, veterans in the VA system choose VA care over non-VA care. And independent assessments of VA health care have concluded that VA health care is as good, if not better, than private care. It is also questionable as to whether the private medical community could even absorb the 9 million veterans that the VA cares for, or if they have the training to do so.

The VA health care system not only supports our nation's veterans, but also contributes to the education of medical professionals and funds research that has resulted in medical breakthroughs for the nation at large. This system plays a critical role in supporting and caring for this nation's veterans; it is imperative that we work together to improve it.

Over the last two years, Congress, the VSO community and the Administration have agreed upon a framework for change, and real change has begun to happen. There is a long road ahead of us; it will take the will of Congress, the Administration and the American public to continue on this path towards a truly integrated network of VA health care.

IAVA members agree that improvements to VHA must include a focus on reform for hiring talent into VA and firing bad actors, consolidating community programs, and updating technology and infrastructure. We are committed to working with Congress and the Administration to achieve these changes. Specifically, Congress needs to extend the Choice Program established by the *Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act*, currently set to sunset in August 2017, to ensure the VA has in place a permanent program that ensures quality and timely care for veterans. Congress should also eliminate the current time and distance criteria for community care access (30 days and 40 miles). Congress should also authorize the VA Secretary the ability to enter into provider agreements, budget flexibility, hiring assistance, and other actions



required to allow for the consolidation of community care programs and VA health care reform.

### **Keep Fighting to Reduce Veteran Suicide**

As many of you know, it has been two years since we celebrated the enactment of the *Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act*, championed by IAVA and named for one of our members who left us far too soon. The SAV Act was intended to help reduce veteran suicides and improve access to quality mental health care for those in need.

Last year we celebrated the enactment of another IAVA-backed bill, the *Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act*, which requires the VA to identify which of its mental health care and suicide prevention programs are most effective for, and have the highest satisfaction rate for, women veterans.

Also last year, we found that the VA Suicide Prevention Office was multiple steps below the Office of the Secretary. Conversely, the Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Office has a larger staff, its own budget, and reports to the Under Secretary. After IAVA brought the matter to the attention of then-Secretary McDonald, he expressed his support, and then-Under Secretary David Shulkin confirmed to us in November that he had elevated the office, and increased its staffing and funding.

Suicide among veterans is still a crisis. IAVA's 2017 member survey shows that 37% of respondents indicate that they have had thoughts of taking their own life since joining the military. Most startling is a noted increase, from 45% in 2015 to 58% in 2017, in the those who know a veteran who has died by suicide.

The SAV Act, *Female Veterans Suicide Prevention Act*, and the VA Suicide Prevention Office are all huge developments, but we need to ensure that these initiatives are being implemented appropriately. IAVA asks that your committees hold oversight hearings early this year to monitor progress and to discuss as a community next steps to address this critical issue.

We also have to address the most vulnerable among our servicemembers and veterans, the veterans that received an other than honorable or "bad paper" discharge, in some cases because of a psychological injury that they were struggling with. Congress, the Department of Defense and the Administration must do more for these veterans.

In this vein, we applaud the March 7 declaration by Secretary Shulkin that he intends to finally start offering mental health services to these veterans. This overdue policy change at VA will change the future for thousands of veterans and their families. We encourage the Secretary to implement the new policy broadly and to engage the VSO



community in that process. We look forward to engaging with the VA closely on its implementation to ensure the scope of the change is meeting the community's needs.

We are also pleased that Congress enacted the *Fairness for Veterans Act* in last year's NDAA that now requires DoD Discharge Review Boards to consider post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury as a basis for review of discharges.

Awarding temporary eligibility to these individuals will allow for access to critical services without delay in health care due to the current process for determining eligibility. However, it is important to stress that with this change will be a resource burden on the VA that will require Congress to support. It is also important to note that while this is a great first step, it cannot be the last.

### **Other Priorities**

Beyond our Big Four priorities for this Congress, you must continue to also support the families of our fallen, focus on veteran employment, encourage initiatives that innovate healthcare, advance initiatives for those exposed to burn pits, support our military families, expand on the success of veterans courts, and work to end veteran homelessness. Our veterans and their families deserve it after their sacrifices during so many years at war.

Finally, I would like to call attention to our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen serving around the world, many in harm's way. Although America knows that our footprint in Iraq and Afghanistan has been significantly reduced, we are still in combat there and in new locations. Approximately 150,000 of our troops are serving overseas TODAY, including nearly 70,000 deployed in support of contingency operations. Our post-9/11 conflicts may be in the rearview mirror to many, but they continue to be very up close and personal to those at the tip of the spear. THANK YOU to our servicemembers and military families for standing the watch. You can always know that we've got your back!

Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's priorities with you here today. We look forward to working with each of you in the critical months ahead and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.



## **Biography of Allison Jaslow**

Allison Jaslow is Chief of Staff for IAVA and is a leading voice and advocate for the post-9/11 generation of veterans. At IAVA, Allison serves as a spokesperson for the organization while overseeing organizational management, operations, communications, policy and research. She is a former Army Captain who served two combat deployments in Iraq.

Before joining IAVA, Allison was a successful campaign manager and a respected political and communications strategist who has been appointed to positions in the White House, both Chambers of Congress, and worked on political campaigns across the country. She recently served as Chief of Staff and Campaign Manager for Illinois Congresswoman Cheri Bustos and previously as Press Secretary for former Virginia Senator and decorated Vietnam veteran Jim Webb.