



Statement of Jeremy Butler
Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
New York City Council Committee on Veterans

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Distinguished Members of the New York City Council, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members and supporters, we thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the future of the Department of Veteran Services (DVS).

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 been successful in fighting and advocating for policies to meet the needs of our nation's veterans and first responders, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, VA reform, filling gaps in care for women veterans, and the *James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Reauthorization Act*. Additionally, we are proud that IAVA was an initial proponent for the creation, proper funding, and oversight of New York City's DVS. We want to see it succeed.

DVS has enormous potential and its establishment was a historic moment for veterans of New York City. DVS can serve to significantly streamline access and improve service delivery to many of the most critical veteran-specific programs and resources already available here. Today we are here to report on matters that we believe will help improve and strengthen DVS in the future. We hope that this testimony will work to better inform this Committee's decisions as they relate to the oversight of this critical program as it continues to take shape and deeper integrates into the services infrastructure of this great city.

In 2015, IAVA and our partners jump-started a national conversation on veteran suicide, but the issue continues to rise. In our 2019 Annual Member Survey, 43% of our members reported suicidal ideation since joining the military, a shocking 12% rise since 2014. Additionally, 59% of IAVA members personally know a veteran who died by suicide, a 19% rise since 2014. The urgency to effectively deliver critical and relevant services to veterans in need has never been greater.



In order to deal with the increase in veteran suicide, DVS must have the capability to serve veterans in crisis in a timely manner. A clear deficit we see within DVS is the lack of a comprehensive case management component and an over-reliance on third party programs to make referrals and connections to resources. DVS was established in 2016, but the department still does not have an in-house Veterans Service Officer or case manager. IAVA recommends that DVS create and adequately fund these positions. An in-house Veteran Service Officer would be able to advise clients on their VA benefits, initiate discharge upgrade applications, and assist veterans in filing the necessary claims or appeals.

These positions are critical to the success of DVS and the veterans that it supports. Removing the additionally steps to getting veterans the services and benefits they have earned will prevent them from falling into the cracks of a giant and intimidating bureaucracy. Without deeper integration into the veteran services infrastructure in New York City and nationally, the potential of DVS will be limited.

Furthermore, IAVA would like to note that DVS does not have an in-house Agency Chief Contracting Officer. DVS has an annual budget that exceeds \$5.3 million, but these funds are currently monitored by other city agencies that are unrelated to veteran services. This process adds unnecessary steps and could possibly lead to error and delay by staffers who may be unfamiliar with DVS's programs. IAVA recommends that in order to most effectively manage funds and award contracts that the DVS create and adequately fund a contracting officer position.

IAVA thanks the committee for its dedication to helping to strengthen, fund and provide oversight of the DVS. Thank you for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these important issues today. We look forward to working with the Committee in the future.