



Statement of Kaitlynn Hetrick
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of
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before the
House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

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Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Bergman, Congresswoman Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America's (IAVA) more than 425,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our views, data, and experiences on an issue affecting too many of our servicemembers, ending sexual harassment at the Department of Veterans Affairs. IAVA would also like to thank the Women Veteran's Task Force for the valuable work they are doing to address the gaps in care for women veterans, as well as addressing the issue of sexual harassment at VA.

Millions of veterans rely on VA for both health care and benefits. It is imperative that the system is able to accommodate those veterans, as well as ensure the safety of the employees and those they serve. Approximately 48 percent of all veterans and about 55 percent of post-9/11 veterans are enrolled in VA care. In IAVA's most recent survey, 81 percent of respondents stated they are enrolled in VA health care and the vast majority have sought care from VA in the last year. Eighty-five percent of those VA users also rated their experience as average or above average. IAVA members have been clear that access to VA care can be challenging, but once in the system, they prefer that care. Further, independent reviews of VA health care support that the care is as good, if not better than the private sector.

While the vast majority of IAVA members give VA high marks, 14 percent of our women veteran members still do not feel safe in VA facilities and 15 percent do not feel respected by VA employees. IAVA recognizes that there have been many improvements, but we cannot ignore that there is still work to be done to ensure that all veterans feel safe and respected so that they can receive the quality care that they have earned.

As a women veteran, I have experienced my fair share of sexual harassment during my military career. Also, as a veteran, I recognize that I have many choices when it comes to my healthcare that I was not offered during my active duty days. As a sexual assault survivor, I made the choice to seek health care outside VA because of the many stories that I have heard from others within the system.



On April 2, a VA doctor was charged with assaulting an Army veteran at a West Virginia VA facility in February 2019. As a veteran that does not use VA healthcare because of all too frequent stories like this, just reading the headline was devastating. In the time that I have been sitting at home during the quarantine, I have given a lot of thought to enrolling at VA and finally having some health concerns treated that I know were a result of my service in the Navy. Seeing this news made me question that option once again.

While VA has taken many steps to make veterans feel safe and has distributed messaging about ending harassment, sexual assault and harassment continue to remain an issue at VA. In the last four months of 2019, we were told that federal authorities were investigating allegations of multiple sexual assaults against VA patients at a West Virginia VA hospital. A San Diego area physician working with VA pleaded guilty to assaulting and exploiting five female patients referred to him by Department health officials. And lastly, a House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC) staffer was harassed and assaulted by a patient at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center.

Just last week, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a glaring report addressing the issues of sexual harassment within VA and the lack of action taken by the Department. In the GAO report, it stated that approximately 22 percent of VA employees experienced some form of harassment between 2014-2016. The report also listed that VA does provide sexual harassment training to its employees but that the training does not cover in-depth information on how to identify sexual harassment. The training is also supplemented at some locations; this can create unclear messaging on the department's policies and leave room for inaccurate interpretation. VA must have mandatory, Department-wide, recurring training that clearly states what sexual harassment is, how to recognize it, how to report it, and a clear definition of what the repercussions are for not reporting. Too many veterans have experienced negative interactions, and the lack of clear direction on what to do is a disservice to both the employees and the veterans that have earned quality care. IAVA supports the GAO's recommendations to require broader training material that would include more examples of sexual harassment as well as information on the Harassment Protection Program (HPP).

The delayed finalization of the HPP program is especially concerning. This program was created four years ago and aims to "prevent harassment and address it before it becomes unlawful." IAVA fully supports the GAO's recommendations to finalize the HPP handbook and for VA to effectively formalize HPP. We also support the recommendation for VA requiring managers to



report all sexual harassment complaints that they receive to Operational Resolution Management (ORM). IAVA commends both the HVAC, as well as the Senate Veteran Affairs Committee, for their swift response to the GAO report and their immediate call to action due to VA's policy shortfalls. VA's sexual harassment policy issues showcase the increasing demand for passage of the *Deborah Sampson Act* (H.R. 3224), which includes a provision that addresses the issue of sexual harassment at VA and requires VA to provide mandatory, Department-wide annual training for employees. We are appreciative of the passage of the bill by the House, but we still need Senate action. IAVA requests that this committee continue to work with your Senate colleagues toward pushing this landmark piece of legislation across the finish line.

Despite the ever-growing contribution of women to our national defense, the American public still does not understand the extent of their involvement and sacrifice. This lack of understanding not only impacts their reception when seeking health care from VA but throughout their transition home. Often having faced an unwelcoming culture in the military, VA can seem like an equally unwelcoming place for women who are transitioning. The VA motto does not help. It explicitly excludes women and their survivors from its mandate, and it reads as outdated: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan."

Women veterans are becoming more prominent in American culture and are stepping up and leading. This can be seen by the growing number of women veterans serving in Congress to the highest leadership positions among the service branches, Veteran Service Organizations, and leading groups. Also, as more women veterans step into the public sphere, their contributions and sacrifices are becoming better known and recognized. However, everyday women veterans enter into VA facilities nationwide and are not recognized for their service. IAVA strongly supports changing the motto to include all who have served, and we urge the committee to pass the *Honoring All Veterans Act* (H.R.3010) to accomplish that goal. Sixty-eight percent of IAVA members support changing the motto or are neutral on the issue. Until women veterans are as known and understood as their male counterparts, IAVA's work will not be done.

With the issues being highlighted at VA, it has to be mentioned that these stem from a much larger issue of culture. The culture issue both affects VA and our current military system. Recently, Spc. Vanessa Guillen, who was stationed at Fort Hood, TX, was murdered by a fellow servicemember. Spc. Guillen was not only the victim of murder but also allegedly suffered sexual harassment and assault by her superiors, an issue she did not feel comfortable coming forward with due to the retaliation experienced by some of her peers when they tried to address



their own assault or harassment. Seventy-three percent of IAVA members that reported their assault or harassment experienced retaliation as a direct result. Spc. Guillen's story, as well as the stories of our members, must not remain the constant. Ninety-three percent of our members would be more likely to report, or it would not have changed their decision to report if the case would have been handled by a trained military prosecutor rather than their commander. This is why IAVA fully supports the *Military Justice Improvement Act (S.1789)*, which moves the decision over whether to prosecute serious crimes like sexual assault to independent, trained, professional military prosecutors. While this legislation is outside of this committee's jurisdiction, we strongly urge IAVA strongly suggest the House introduce paralleled legislation. Because military service is directly related to care delivered by the VA, we must ensure safety and due process of personnel in the former as we reform the way the latter treats its veterans. These situations, and the recent GAO report, all highlight the bigger culture issue within both VA and the military. We must hold VA accountable and require more in-depth sexual harassment training. I want to use the VA health system without fear. An overwhelming majority of IAVA members rate VA healthcare as average to above-average, and I have a right to this benefit by having served in the United States Navy. We have earned better.

Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these issues today. I look forward to working with both the Subcommittee and the Task Force in the future.



Biography of Kaitlynn Hetrick

Kaitlynn Hetrick serves as IAVA's Government Affairs Associate, helping to lead IAVA's advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C. She served in the United States Navy for four years as an Aviation Electronics Technician 3rd Class. Since departing from the Navy in 2014, she used her GI Bill to obtain her bachelor's degree at Baldwin Wallace University while working with her fellow student veterans. Serving first as the Secretary of her university's Student Veteran Organization and then as the President, Kaitlynn worked to help fellow student vets take advantage of all the programs offered to them due to their service. Kaitlynn has also worked with several veteran non-profits to help disabled and transitioning former servicemembers.