



**Statement of Jeremy Butler**  
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*of*  
**Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**  
*before a joint hearing of the*  
**Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees**  
  
**March 4, 2021**

Chairman Tester, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Moran and Ranking Member Bost, and distinguished members of the Committees, 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.

2020 was an incredibly challenging year for everyone, not only the veteran community. Shortly after I testified in front of you last March, our world shifted dramatically. Within a week we were in quarantine and have been working remotely ever since. However, despite the unprecedented challenges, IAVA remained steadfast in our commitment to the post-9/11 generation of veterans, and I am extremely proud of the work that we were able to accomplish in 2020. Working with Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle we were able to pass critical reforms that will positively affect many veterans for years to come, including in areas of mental health care, women veterans, and veterans education. One year ago I urged you all to pass the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* and the *Deborah Sampson Act*, and I am proud that we were able to get both of those bills signed into law. We also worked to help pass timely protections for military-connected students that were facing an incredible amount of uncertainty as their schools went fully remote. Additionally, we helped to pass legislation last year to establish a national suicide prevention hotline, 9-8-8, to ensure that all Americans, including veterans, have easier access in times of crisis to lifesaving mental health and suicide prevention resources.

Despite unprecedented challenges, in 2020 IAVA continued to fight tirelessly for this generation of veterans, conducting over 300 Capitol Hill meetings, speaking directly with VA leadership, and executing robust media outreach to highlight the needs of post-9/11 veterans during this pandemic.

While 2020 was a landmark year for veterans legislation, as many of you know the work is far from over. In 2021 we will remain focused on the oversight of these critical reforms, to ensure they are being enacted as Congress intended. Additionally, we must build on this momentum to



continue to address the unmet needs of veterans, especially those veterans suffering from toxic exposures like burn pits. We can not let this issue become the Agent Orange of the post-9/11 generation. We believe that the 117th Congress is when veterans that have been exposed will finally get the health care and benefits that they rightfully deserve.

We also must recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is not over, and the effects of this unprecedented event will be long lasting. IAVA is proud to be part of the Veterans Coalition for Vaccination, that is helping to combat COVID-19 to raise awareness, expand access, and ensure that all Americans have equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. However, we must also address issues caused by this pandemic, such as veteran unemployment. Veterans were not immune to the damage that COVID-19 caused to the American economy and we once again saw the veteran unemployment rate rise, with the youngest generation of veterans the most severely impacted. IAVA will fight to expand resources for veterans that have lost their job due to the pandemic through aggressive retaining programs.

2020 will be remembered as a historic year for many reasons. Despite the challenges I thank all the Committee members that worked tirelessly to ensure that pressing issues facing our nation's veterans were not forgotten. As we look to 2021 and the 117th Congress we must not rest, but continue to press forward with our work.

### **Burn Pits and Toxic Exposures**

According to IAVA's most recent member survey, 86% of IAVA members were exposed to burn pits during their deployments and over 88% of those exposed believe they already have or may have symptoms.

Year after year, the concern grows surrounding the health impacts of burn pits and toxic exposures in recent conflicts. Burn pits were a common way to get rid of waste at military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly between 2001 and 2010. The effect of burn pits is not just the chemicals in the smoke, but the particulate matter these men and women breathed in from the ashes and dust from the fires themselves.

There are other hazards beyond burn pits that occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan that may pose danger for respiratory illnesses including human waste, irritant gases, high levels of fine dust, heavy metals in urban environments, explosives and depleted uranium used in munitions. Without due attention, this issue may become the Agent Orange of the post-9/11 era of veterans, with veterans waiting decades for closure and care. It is past time that comprehensive action is



taken to address the growing concern that these exposures have had severe impacts on veterans' long term health.

For many that feel they are suffering from their exposure to burn pits or other toxic exposures, accessing quality care can be a challenge. At VA, barriers to care are even more apparent, as the VA does not fully recognize claims connecting injury or illness to burn pit exposure.

Like those who fought for recognition of the effects of Agent Orange, the hope for those exposed to burn pits and other toxic exposures is that they will one day be able to claim certain illnesses and injuries as presumptive service-connected illnesses or injuries due to their exposure. Until the VA recognizes the damage burn pits had on the health of those who served around them, access to VA benefits and health care will be challenging.

The 117th Congress must be the Congress that addresses this critical issue and gets veterans the health care and benefits that they deserve. IAVA will work tirelessly on two bills to address these issues. We believe that both the *Toxic Exposures in the American Military (TEAM) Act* and the *Presumptive Benefits for War Fighters Exposed to Burn Pits and Other Toxins Act* must be passed into law this year. We thank Senators Thom Tillis and Kirsten Gillibrand for their leadership on this issue to finally deliver health care and benefits to veterans that have been exposed.

### **Defend and Expand Veterans Education and Economic Opportunities**

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the American economy will be long lasting. Veterans, and especially the post-9/11 generation of veterans, have been hit extremely hard by unemployment. Younger veterans have consistently had higher rates of unemployment than their older veteran peers, and their civilian counterparts. It is clear that we need bold, aggressive legislation to confront these challenges. This is why IAVA has been working to pass the *Veterans Economic Recovery Act* since its introduction last year. This critically important legislation will provide up to 12 months of retraining assistance for veterans who are unemployed due to the pandemic. While we appreciate the House efforts to open this program to 17,500 eligible veterans, more must be done and IAVA asks the Committees to work to expand this program to at least 35,000 veterans. It is clear that in order to fight the effects of the pandemic that we must take new, bold approaches to ensure that a generation of veterans are not left behind due to the economic impact of COVID-19.

To further address employment and to fight the pandemic, IAVA worked with Rep. Conor Lamb and Sen. Gary Peters to develop the *Supporting Education Recognition for Veterans during*



*Emergencies (SERVE) Act* to ensure veterans' service-connected medical qualifications and expertise are utilized by the VA and civilian healthcare facilities to meet the challenges of the Coronavirus.

Veterans who gained critical medical skills in the military are an under-tapped source, and we need to get them into the fight and help alleviate medical staffing shortfalls across the country. The SERVE Act is an easy, impactful solution that Congress should immediately enact to address the continuing crisis.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has now sent more than one million veterans and dependents to school, and remains one of the military's best retention and recruiting tools. In IAVA's latest member survey, 93% of IAVA members reported having used, or that they are currently using or planning to transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit. 79% agree that the Post-9/11 GI Bill is essential to military recruitment and 87% believe it is extremely or very important to transition to civilian life.

However, the GI Bill is still being exploited by underperforming actors who take advantage of veterans' benefits and often leave veterans stuck with unnecessary debt and a subpar education. For-profit colleges are required to get at least 10% of their revenue from outside of federal financial aid funds, but many exploit a loophole in the law that does not count GI Bill and DoD Tuition Assistance benefits as federal funds, making servicemembers and veterans a target for their generous benefits. This is why IAVA is a proud supporter of closing the 90/10 loophole to protect veterans, servicemembers, and being responsible stewards of taxpayers dollars. These predatory schools should not be 100% dependent on American taxpayer dollars while robbing veterans of hard-earned education benefits.

In 2020, many military-connected students had to quickly adjust to 100% online classes, and the uncertainty of what that would mean for their housing allowance. IAVA was quick to work with our VSO and Congressional partners to ensure that military-connected students would continue receiving their full housing allowance if their school shifted online. While these protections were crucial for students that were forced into an online-only environment, there remains concerns with making this a permanent change going forward. Stronger protections for military-connected students attending online-only classes will be needed to help safeguard these students from predatory institutions. IAVA also urges the Committees to oversee the implementation of critical reforms in the GI Bill passed last Congress. The *Protect the GI Bill Act* passed last Congress ensures that GI Bill money is not spent on schools with a proven history of defrauding students. It is extremely important that this bill is properly implemented to ensure that students are protected and the GI Bill is not being spent on schools with a proven predatory history.



## **Combat Suicide Among Troops and Veterans**

For nearly a decade, IAVA and the veteran community have called for immediate action by our nation's leaders to combat the crisis of 20 servicemembers and veterans dying every day from suicide. In the last two years, we made groundbreaking strides towards addressing this epidemic.

2020 was a significant year in mental health and suicide prevention. In September 2020, I testified before both the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees on the urgent need to pass the centerpiece of our Campaign to Combat Suicide - the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* (S. 785). I am happy to be before you all today to express my gratitude for your diligence and hard work ensuring that this legislation was signed into law, and for the vision of Chairman Tester and Ranking Member Moran for their vision and initiative.

This legislation will result in critical reforms in how America combats the suicide crisis. Key provisions include the creation of a community grant program to help identify isolated veterans and provide mental health services, modeled after the extremely successful Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. These targeted programs are designed to identify the 14 veterans per day who die by suicide not currently participating in VA services and connect them to lifesaving resources. Additionally, this legislation will expand VA's tele-health services at a time when veterans may be feeling more disconnected than ever before. These are critical improvements to VA care. But the work is not done.

According to the most recent VA data, the youngest cohort of veterans, post-9/11 veterans aged 18 to 34, have the highest rate of suicide. And while not always an indicator of suicide, mental health injuries continue to disproportionately impact the post-9/11 generation. In our latest member survey, a stunning 65% of IAVA members reported service-connected PTSD and over half reported anxiety (58%) or depression (56%). Meanwhile, the nation and VA struggle to keep up with the demand for mental health care and mental health care providers such as psychiatrists and psychologists, both of which are in the top 5 for VA staffing shortages.

Now that the *Commander Hannon Act* has been successfully passed into law, it is our responsibility to ensure its successful implementation. Oversight of the execution of this new law is a top priority for IAVA, especially considering its 34 separate provisions. Staffing improvement plans for mental health professionals, increased tracking metrics, and funding for numerous studies are just a few of the disparate sections of this comprehensive legislation.



Furthermore, despite additional funding and scrutiny, VA still faces a shortage of mental health care professionals, specifically in rural areas. Recent legislation targeted deficiencies in recruitment and retention by creating separate scholarship and student loan repayment programs and by adding \$65 million to VA's recruitment, relocation, and retention bonuses budget. However, these scholarships are extremely limited in number and capacity.

IAVA recommends that VA take additional measures in order to address the shortage of qualified medical professionals within VHA. Moving psychologists under the Hiring Authority, Title 38, which would provide a more competitive salary rather than the federal GS pay scale is one viable option. Private sector psychologists earn a considerably higher salary than their VA colleagues. Furthermore, psychologists and some pharmacists are the only doctorate-level medical professionals at VA who are not included in Title 38.

We will also continue to spread public awareness for the suicide crisis as thought leaders in panels, roundtable discussions with policymakers, and in documentaries. Sobering statistics on suicide continue to be released, identifying women veterans at especially high risk of suicide. IAVA's groundbreaking Quick Reaction Force (QRF) is a safety net for veterans and families and provides comprehensive care management, resource connections and 24/7 peer-to-peer support for any veteran or family member in need. QRF's services are free and confidential and are available to any veteran or family member, regardless of era, discharge status or location, making the barrier of entry very low. The needs of veterans remain high, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and in 2020, QRF saw a 400% increase in clients served from 2019. QRF is built to address all aspects of a veteran's life that are in need of intervention and support and we do this by providing holistic and comprehensive care for all of our clients. In 2020 more than 15% of all client requests were directly related to mental health needs, and 56% were related to emergency financial assistance or the threat of homelessness, or both, which directly impacts an individual's overall well-being and stability. IAVA continues to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) and also has 24/7 in-house clinical support for clients that reach out to the program and are at risk for suicide.

## **Women Veterans**

At the end of 2020, we celebrated as the *Deborah Sampson Act*, the cornerstone of IAVA's #SheWhoBorneTheBattle campaign for the past four years, officially passed Congress while included in the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D., Veterans Health Care and Benefits Act*. It was a historic year for women veterans and will ensure that VA is a place for all veterans. We thank all those that were relentless in their efforts to push this instrumental piece of legislation over the finish line. The *Deborah Sampson Act* includes provisions that will address sexual



harassment and assault in VA facilities, establish an Office of Women's Health directly under the Undersecretary of VA for Health, and improve access to care and benefits for survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST). We should most certainly celebrate this historic win but recognize that our work is far from over.

Women veterans and servicemembers are currently the fastest-growing populations in the military and veteran communities. Despite these numbers consistently growing since the 1970s, veteran services and benefits for women often fall behind. Over the past few years, there has been a groundswell of support for women veterans' issues. From health care access to reproductive health services to a seismic culture change within the veteran community, women veterans have rightly been focused on and elevated on Capitol Hill, inside VA, and nationally. While this growing interest has been encouraging, VA continues to have a motto that explicitly leaves women veterans out. It is past time that we recognize the service of all veterans from the moment they walk through the doors of a VA. This change must start at the top. Last year we were encouraged when the House unanimously passed legislation to approve the motto change; however, the Senate was not able to take it up before the year's end. IAVA will continue to call for changing the current VA motto to be gender-neutral and we encourage your committees to pass this legislation soon.

For years, VA has faced scrutiny for sexual harassment and assault within their medical centers, and the lack of action by top leadership. While not solely a women veterans issue, it is known that these issues disproportionately affect women and the lack of action by VA furthers the problem of women veterans feeling unwelcome at their facilities. We know that this issue of sexual assault and harassment stems from a larger issue within the military community. While this is currently a hearing to address issues within the veteran community, 15 of you also sit on the Armed Services Committee and IAVA feels it would be a mistake not to take this opportunity to also address the problem of sexual assault and harassment within our military.

In IAVA's most recent survey, 43% of our female members stated that they are survivors of military sexual trauma. Of those, only 31% reported the crime, and 73% reported experiencing some sort of retaliation as a result of their report. Those who did not report listed their reasons for not reporting as fear of retaliation by their peers or commander, concern about the impact on their career, and doubt that their commander would believe them. Our survey data, and the recent stories that have made this issue impossible to ignore, is why a trained military prosecutor should have the authority to decide to move forward with a sexual assault case, instead of a commander. If Congress values retaining women servicemembers then it must pass legislation that removes a servicemember's chain of command from the decision and give it to independent, trained prosecutors. Now is the time to pass the *Military Justice Improvement Act*. Fruitless promises by



senior military leaders to prioritize a solution that preserves the current role of the chain of command have gone on too long.

### **Support for Veterans Who Want to Utilize Medical Cannabis**

The use of medical cannabis has been growing in support among the veteran population for quite some time. For years, IAVA members have sounded off in support of researching and legalizing medical cannabis use for treating the wounds of war. Veterans consistently and passionately have communicated that cannabis offers effective help in tackling some of the most pressing injuries we face when returning from war. In our latest Member Survey, over 80% of IAVA members supported legalization for medicinal use. Across party lines, medicinal cannabis has been rapidly increasing in support. Yet our national policies are outdated, research is lacking, and stigma persists.

Over the past few years, IAVA members have set out to change the national conversation around cannabis and underscore the need for bipartisan, evidence-based, common-sense solutions that can bring relief to millions, save taxpayers billions and create thousands of jobs for veterans nationwide.

In 2021, IAVA will continue our fight on behalf of veterans who want to use medicinal cannabis and we remain committed to the goal of VA conducting research into the efficacy of medical cannabis as a treatment for veterans with chronic pain, PTSD, and other conditions. However, As a Schedule I drug under the FDA, research into the effects and efficacy of cannabis has been stagnant, cumbersome, and convoluted. While not impossible, federal research into cannabis faces many bureaucratic hurdles that hinder good research. A January 2017 National Academy of Sciences study found “conclusive or substantial” evidence that cannabis is effective in treating chronic pain, moderate evidence that cannabis helps with sleep, and the science is inconclusive on cannabis as an anxiety and PTSD treatment option. However, federal bureaucratic hurdles continue to halt the system and stymie good research. We will never get a definitive answer on the efficacy of cannabis as a treatment option while federal regulations that actively undermine solid research studies remain in place. The system is antiquated and must be adjusted to match state laws and research needs. For these reasons, in the 117th Congress IAVA will work to remove these barriers to research and usage to those veterans where it is already legal by advocating to remove cannabis as a Schedule I drug.



## **Global War on Terrorism Memorial**

Over 75% of IAVA veterans and military members do not believe that the American public understands their sacrifice. Nearly 7,000 service members have given their lives in overseas post-9/11 conflicts and the nation must honor these men and women, those who continue to serve, and their families.

We can take a big step in helping to close this divide by passing the *Global War on Terrorism Memorial Location Act* to enable the construction of a GWOT Memorial on the National Mall, in the Reserve, in Washington, DC. Although our footprint in Iraq and Afghanistan has been significantly reduced since the surge years, our forces continue the fight against terrorism around the globe. This fight is not over, nor will it be any time soon, and our military families continue to sacrifice. Those who have fought, and continue to serve, know that there is not a V-GWOT parade on the horizon, but we can provide a solemn place of honor on the National Mall where servicemembers, veterans, and their families can gather to reflect and remember. Those of you who have witnessed the heart-wrenching scene that plays out in Section 60 across the Potomac each Memorial Day largely hidden from public view know what I am talking about. If you have not, I invite you to visit with IAVA - we go there and pay tribute every year. It is time to build the Memorial in a place of prominence now, and those of you who sit in the House Natural Resources and Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committees can play an important role and advance this legislation.

Members of both Committees, 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 and working with the Committees in the future.