



Statement of Kaitlynn Hetrick
Associate, Government Affairs
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations

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Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Moore, 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 the pending legislation before the Subcommittee today.

IAVA appreciates the Subcommittee for bringing forward legislation that touches on a few of our priorities for 2021, which are: Modernize Government to Support Today's Veterans and End Veteran Homelessness.

Modernize Government to Support Today's Veterans

In the era of #MeToo, sexual harassment has never been more prominent in national conversations. The culture of sexual harassment pervades every aspect of society, including government agencies and health care facilities. While VA has implemented programs to combat sexual harassment in its facilities, both for VA staff and VA patients, they have fallen short in practice. These programs are a fantastic step in the right direction but ensuring the patients are aware of these programs before entering VA's doors and empowering VA staff to intervene in harassment situations and understand the reporting requirements must be a top priority for VA.

In 2019, after a reported sexual assault at the DC VA Hospital, IAVA and advocates in the veteran community called for answers. However, VA leadership made a concerted effort to discredit the report and the veteran. VA requires leadership that will take the issue of sexual assault and harassment in their facilities seriously. It is estimated that three out of four victims of sexual assault will not report and despite VA stating that they have a zero-tolerance policy for sexual assault and harassment, incidents like this make it more difficult for victims to feel comfortable coming forward or even safe utilizing VA services.

Because of these reasons, IAVA supports the draft legislation, *Improving VA Accountability to Prevent Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Act* which would aid those that experience sexual harassment or discrimination at VA facilities. We must ensure that VA is a safe place for every veteran and that both veterans utilizing services and employees feel the environment is free of hostility.



IAVA also supports the draft legislation, the *VA Equal Employment Counseling Modernization Act*. Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) counselors are invaluable at the VA when it comes to ensuring that employees feel secure and that they have a clear path to filing complaints when they feel discriminated against. Removing the cap on the number of full-time EEO counselors would aid the Department in having a robust response when it comes to discrimination complaints.

Additionally, the current climate in our country has made it impossible to ignore the need to take a hard look at the way our community police handle certain situations. VA is not excluded from this examination. IAVA supports the draft *VA Police Improvement and Accountability Act* to require VA police to implement the use of body cameras, improve training and suicide prevention strategies, provide Congress with an analysis of staffing needs, and strengthen its adherence to civil rights laws.

IAVA is also supportive of the draft *Strengthening Oversight for Veterans Act*, which would give subpoena power to the Office of Inspector General (OIG) for former employees during investigations. This legislation would aid the OIG in conducting more thorough investigations to help to ensure VA is doing all it should and can to serve our nation's veterans.

In 2017, IAVA strongly supported the creation of the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP) protection and its commitment to “ensuring accountability within the Department of Veterans Affairs.” Then in 2019, the OIG published a report¹ that found OAWP was acting “in ways that were inconsistent with its statutory authority while it simultaneously floundered in its mission to protect whistleblowers.” This report is extremely concerning. IAVA agrees that changes can and should be made but before IAVA can fully form our opinion of the two pieces of legislation directed at making changes to the OAWP that are up for discussion today, IAVA would like to see data and statements from VA, OAWP, and Office of Special Counsel on how both of these pieces of legislation would affect them.

In recent years, VA has made incredible strides to modernize its internal and external operating systems. The implementation of new interoperable electronic health records is underway, allowing VA and DoD clinicians to share health data, ensuring continuity of care for transitioning servicemembers. Additionally, VA has updated its website to be more interactive and intuitive, allowing veterans to quickly find the information they need. These are major accomplishments and a system slowly but surely moving to the 21st century is a win for all veterans. But there are still many improvements to be made.

At the end of 2019, VA had a backlog of 2,631 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and 118 appeals. Most of the time, veterans file these requests themselves to obtain military records, VA claim files, and many other things. By law, VA is to respond to these requests within 20

¹ <https://www.va.gov/oig/pubs/VAOIG-18-04968-249.pdf>



business days, a practice that is currently not happening due to technology and inefficient procedures. The draft *VA FOIA Reform Act* would require that VA meet the deadline that is set before them by law and submit a plan that would list how they can streamline the current process to ensure veterans are receiving their requests on time. IAVA supports this legislation and encourages VA to ensure they are fulfilling veterans' requests for their information promptly and being transparent when it comes to what they need to fulfill these requests within the 20 business day requirement set by law.

After a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report² in 2017 detailed that a large amount of VA healthcare-related information, such as wait times, staffing, and vacancy information, had been stored on a website that is “not easily accessible and understandable.” It was recommended that VA streamline the process and consolidate the difficult to use website with another patient information website that the GAO determined to be “effective in presenting information about the performance about VA medical centers.” The report also found that VA was not ensuring the information displayed was accurate or complete. IAVA finds this process to be unacceptable but also unsurprising. In the past few years, VA has invested resources in updating its website to make it more interactive and intuitive; with great success but it has taken many years to bring VA closer to the 21st century. To continue this momentum, VA must build upon its successes and continue to invest in innovative platforms and technologies to keep up with today's veterans. IAVA supports the draft *VA Quality Health Care Accountability and Transparency Act* which would require VA to streamline the display of information and collate it to one website. We need a system that leverages the use of new technologies to streamline processes and enables the VA to take a more dynamic approach to respond to the needs of today's veterans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every facet of our lives, and veterans have been no exception. IAVA strongly advocated for several pieces of legislation aimed at helping veterans through the national health crisis such as the *Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act* H.R. 6322 and *Veterans Economic Recovery Act*, which was included in the most recent Coronavirus relief legislation *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021* H.R. 637. IAVA would like to communicate our strong desire for accountability and maximum transparency to Capitol Hill and veteran service organizations when it comes to funds that have been allocated to VA during these trying times.

Each generation of veterans, including the post-9/11 generation, relies on VA for both health care and benefits, and an agile system capable of accommodating them is critical. About 49% of all veterans are enrolled in VA health care.³ Among IAVA member survey respondents, 84% are enrolled in VA health care, of whom, 85% rated their experience at VA as average or above average.⁴ IAVA members have been clear that access to VA care can be challenging, but once in

² <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-741>

³ https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Quickfacts/VA_Utilization_Profile_2017.pdf

⁴ <https://iava.org/survey2020/IAVA-2020-Member-Survey.pdf>



the system, they are satisfied with their treatment. Further independent reviews of VA health care show that the quality often exceeds the private sector.⁵

While VA consistently performs above average when it comes to their care for veterans, COVID-19 taught us many lessons, one of the most important being how necessary it is for VA to have a strong supply chain when it comes to times of crisis. During these unprecedented times, VA's supply chain crumbled, disrupting the ability for VA to fully execute its tasks during the early months of the pandemic. At the Atlanta VA Medical Center, the lack of strong inventory records led to the disposal of \$122,000 worth of expired heart stents on its shelves, showcasing how disheveled VA's current supply system is.

The Department of Defense's Warstopper program contracts with manufacturers and supplies to keep medical inventory on hand in case of an emergency. During the pandemic, this program helped get N95 masks, gloves, isolation gowns, and other supplies to hospitals. IAVA strongly supports the *VA Supply Chain Resiliency Act* (H.R. 2082) which would add VA into this program, better equipping VA to handle future medical crises.

End Veteran Homelessness

In 2015, IAVA applauded the settlement reached between the VA and plaintiffs concerning the future of the West Los Angeles Medical Center. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Vietnam Veterans of America and 10 homeless veterans to return the full use of the land to local veterans and related programs, and specifically to battle homelessness. The *West Los Angeles VA Campus Improvement Act* (H.R. 711) would allow the West Los Angeles VA Campus to use proceeds from property leasing to build additional housing for homeless veterans. Under current VA regulations, the West LA VA can only use lease proceeds for campus beautification.

In 2019, 3,878 homeless veterans were identified in Los Angeles, the largest number in the country. This was a significant decrease from 2017 but is still an issue that needs to be addressed. Ending veteran homelessness is one of IAVA's top priorities and we feel this legislation would greatly aid the efforts to reduce the number of homeless veterans in the Los Angeles area.

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 the Subcommittee in the future.

⁵ https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP66619.html



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 Veterans of America chapter 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.