



Statement of Jeremy Butler
Before a
Joint Hearing before the
House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees
March 1, 2023

Statement of Jeremy Butler
Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
Before a joint hearing before the
House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees

March 1, 2023

Chairman Tester, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Moran, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the Committee, 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 on our policy priorities for the 118th Congress.

Before I dive into our policy priorities, I would like to draw your attention to a group of IAVA's member advocates here today, who have flown in from around the country as part of IAVA's first in-person fly-in in three years. Our member fly-in events are IAVA's primary member advocacy and professional engagement events, conducted at multiple intervals throughout the year. The members who participate in these events look a little different from those some of you may have seen in our early days, having newly returned from the first deployments in the post-9/11 conflicts. They are a little more seasoned and experienced, yet most are still new to Capitol Hill advocacy and they have much to offer. Over the years, some have joined the staff of IAVA and other national VSOs, some have joined Congressional staff and the Administration, some have run for office, and many others have returned home with a passion for improving the lives of veterans and military families and have taken on new challenges in their communities.

Because there are a number of new faces on your committees, I want to emphasize how much IAVA and others in our community have valued the mostly-bipartisan approach by your panels in addressing the needs of the extensive sacrifices made by veterans and military families during and following our wars. Although we may often disagree on the reasons we go to war, or the way they are prosecuted, we must all work together to spare no expense or effort to care for those who have borne the battle and their families.

With significant recent victories for IAVA-backed legislation addressing military toxic exposures, combating the suicide crisis, defending the GI Bill from abuse, and filling gaps in care for female veterans, what is needed from the 118th Congress is energetic oversight to ensure the proper implementation of the new laws. We will continue to be ready to work with you and the Administration to execute recently-enacted legislation and to develop and pass new measures.



Honoring Our PACT Act (P.L 117-168)

The best recent example of the hard-fought battles by IAVA and our community is also a priority for us among newly-enacted legislation that will require strong oversight by your committees and this Congress.

IAVA commends the hard work and tough decisions made by members of your committees and Congressional leaders leading up to the summer 2022 passage of the *Honoring Our PACT Act*, the largest veterans health legislation ever passed, and the centerpiece of IAVA's most successful year ever. The legislation was supported by the *entire* military and veteran community and we worked together for years to see final passage. It is impossible to measure the great appreciation we have for those who supported us in this effort. Thank you.

The VA, Congress and the VSO community have an enormous responsibility to get this right. Secretary McDonough and the VA have done an incredible job in the opening months following enactment to inform veterans of their new benefits and how to enroll in the VA. The efforts have, frankly, surpassed what we had thought possible by the VA. The VSO community has stepped up and shared the responsibility to reach as many veterans and military families as possible. IAVA has done outreach through traditional and social media, public events, and will continue to look for new opportunities and partnerships. These efforts must continue.

The Department of Defense (DoD) also has a substantial responsibility with many who have been exposed over the course of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), still on active duty today and who will one day transition from service. Nearly 200,000 service members leave the military each year and they and their families need to know the benefits they have earned and how to get enrolled in the VA to obtain them. Many service members in the Reserve and Guard component are eligible now for VA care and need immediate outreach by DoD and the VA.

The VA must also reach out to American Indian Tribes, Native Hawaiians and Alaskan Natives through the Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Tribal veterans service organizations, and other suitable organizations and agencies. Additionally, a concerted effort must be made to reach veterans throughout rural America as they are often more disconnected than others.

Senior leader engagement throughout both Departments is critical, not only to use their leadership stature that often commands greater attention and respect, but to also set the example for leaders throughout their respective organizations.

Outreach by DoD, VA, and VSOs is critical, but Congress plays a massive role, not only in an oversight capacity - which we strongly encourage - but in its ability to reach veterans in your states and districts. Please do not wait for VA and DoD - plan and conduct them now in your own



Congressional districts and/or partner with other federal, state and local officials to maximize impact. Invite the VSOs to these to help carry the message.

Military Justice and Improving Prevention Act (2022 and 2023 NDAA's)

Sexual assault and related trauma remains to be a crisis in our military. Military sexual trauma affects an estimated one in four women veterans and one in one-hundred male veterans, according to VA. Our most recent member survey informed us that of 58% of IAVA female members and 4% of males are military sexual assault survivors. Only 34% of those assaulted reported the crime, and of those who did report it, 63% say they experienced retaliation.

Because of these experiences, we have worked for many years with Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and bipartisan cosponsors of the *Military Justice and Increasing Prevention Act* (MJIIPA) to make critical reforms to military law. Recently, IAVA hailed historic changes in the FY2023 NDAA that completed work begun with the FY2022 bill's transfer of authority over prosecutions for major crimes from military commanders, where they have long resided, to professional prosecutors. IAVA eagerly awaits the implementation of these sweeping new provisions and encourages strong bipartisan oversight to ensure that the full intent of the legislation is met by DoD.

Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act (P.L. 117-328)

Housing insecurity and homelessness are not new challenges facing our nation's veteran population. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 40,056 veterans are homeless on any given night, and approximately twice that many experience homelessness throughout the year. American veteran households are also experiencing difficult economic situations such as unemployment. These additional economic challenges, coupled with the ongoing effect of the pandemic, place veterans at a greater risk of becoming homeless. Housing is more than just shelter – it is the foundation for a stable and healthy life. Limited access to mental and physical healthcare and infectious diseases also exacerbate homeless veterans' poor quality of life. No man or woman who has sacrificed for and served our country should live without shelter or struggle to meet their basic needs.

To combat this problem, IAVA worked closely with other VSOs to enact the *Building Solutions for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness Act*, legislation to permanently cut red tape on capital grants provided by VA for organizations assisting veterans experiencing homelessness. It will ensure organizations have many of the necessary flexibilities to continue supporting veterans and avoid derailing their progress toward effectively ending veterans homelessness.

While we will definitely celebrate the passage of those provisions last Congress, our efforts on behalf of homeless veterans will continue. IAVA has long advocated for the definition of "homeless veteran" to include marginally sheltered or "couch surfing" veterans. In IAVA's most



recent survey, 81% of our members stated they couch surfed after leaving the military. Sleeping in the home of a friend or family member, with no legal ties to the domicile, should not be determined to be a “home” for a veteran. It is not a stable situation and the veteran could find themselves in a housing emergency at any time.

Additionally, IAVA strongly encourages oversight of VA and HUD homeless programs to ensure existing funds are effectively and fully utilized based on need, and ensure the VA provides technical assistance and adequate training to grant recipients who assist homeless veterans. For example, in November 2022, there were over 28,000 unused VA homeless vouchers. Those vouchers could have been used to house a veteran that did not currently have stable housing. Congress should also ensure VA is equipped with the staffing capacity and funding necessary to provide care and assistance for veterans to address the root causes of homelessness.

It is also important to point out that the picture of a homeless veteran is constantly changing. Women veterans historically are at higher risk for homelessness than their civilian counterparts. Providing safe facilities for women that will address their specific needs is critical. Others are younger veterans who may just need temporary support. Ensuring these facilities also accept children is vital. VA must continue partnerships to align effective, dynamic services to these demographic shifts.

Finally, IAVA strongly urges the VA to require comprehensive data on every homeless veteran and set specific goals for reducing the number of veterans experiencing homelessness.

Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act (P.L. 116-171)

To combat the crisis of veteran suicide - a top priority for IAVA members - we worked with Sen. Tester and many others on our panels to develop and pass the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* to reform mental health care at the VA by hiring and training more professionals in this field, developing innovative methods to reach veterans with care, and establishing a grant program to better collaborate with community organizations already serving veterans. The Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program was a critical provision we sought inclusion of in the bill, and IAVA encourages continued strong Congressional oversight to ensure the intent of Congress and the VSO community is met.

Deborah Sampson Act (P.L. 116-315)

The *Deborah Sampson Act*, which IAVA developed with Sens. Tester and Boozman, Rep. Brownley, and many of you on both committees to fill gaps in care for women veterans. The centerpiece of our #SheWhoBorneTheBattle campaign remains the most comprehensive legislation of its kind to empower the fastest growing cohort in our military and veteran community. Although the legislation was signed into law on Jan. 25, 2021, we receive constant



inquiries by supporters of this legislation into its status, so we are seeking a comprehensive recent written report on its progress towards implementation.

Separate from this legislation, but very important to many of our female veterans, is the need to change the VA motto to ensure it is one that recognizes the service of all Americans who have served. The VA Secretary has pledged to make this important change and IAVA would like to ensure that it is completed early this year.

Whether it is ensuring proper implementation of this important new law, or other ways to fill gaps in care for women veterans, please come to IAVA with your ideas and concerns on how we can keep this critical work moving forward.

Defend the GI Bill from Predatory Schools

Ever since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into law in 2008, IAVA and our VSO partners have defended the benefit, fought for improvements, and worked to successfully block predatory schools from benefiting from loopholes in military and veteran education programs.

In 2021 IAVA celebrated passage of legislation, after many years of work with our VSO partners, to finally close the “90/10 loophole” which rewarded predatory schools for targeting veteran students for their generous education benefits. IAVA then played a lead role in the federal rulemaking process to ensure the Education Department implemented the law as intended. The Department published its final rule in October 2022, and this year, schools are expected to account for their use of military-connected education funds according to the intent of the legislation. IAVA calls on Congress to closely monitor the implementation of this legislation and ensure that veterans and military families are protected.

Major Richard Star Act

Last year, the *Major Richard Star Act* reached a tipping point as the legislation was supported by more than two-thirds of the 117th Congress. IAVA rallied together with the veteran community with one united voice to support our combat-injured medical retirees. The *Star Act* would end the unjust tax on the 42,000 retirees whose military careers were cut short due to combat-related injuries, finally allowing them to collect hundreds of dollars per month that they have been denied up until now.

IAVA strongly believes that DoD retirement pay and VA disability compensation are two separate benefits established by Congress with two different legislative intents. Receiving both benefits, concurrently, should never be considered “double dipping,” and no combat-injured medical retiree should be subject to this unjust offset. IAVA will continue to relentlessly advocate for legislation to eliminate the offset for ALL retirees and the *Major Richard Star Act* is the first step towards achieving that goal.



Afghan Accountability Act

Many American veterans, especially those who served in Operation Enduring Freedom over the last two decades, were troubled by the chaotic exit by the U.S. and our allies from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. The US-backed government essentially collapsed overnight, and we left behind nearly all of the Afghans who partnered with us during the war, even after we promised them a pathway to safety in the US following their service.

To right this tremendous wrong and send a strong message to the world that we are following through with our commitment to stand by our wartime allies, the bipartisan *Afghan Adjustment Act* establishes a legal adjustment process for Afghan evacuees who have been resettled into local communities across the United States. After completing significant additional security vetting required during the application process, this adjustment of status would provide eligible Afghans in need of protection with stability as they continue to rebuild their lives in America and establish a process for creating and implementing a strategy to continue the relocation and resettlement of eligible Afghan partners.

Although your committees do not have jurisdiction over the *Afghan Adjustment Act*, it is critically important for many veterans you serve to know that their advocates on Capitol Hill are working on their behalf to bring to safety those who had their backs in Afghanistan. We appreciate members of your committees from both sides for your advocacy for this legislation, and we encourage others to join in support early this year.

VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act

Since 2017, IAVA has made it one of our top priorities to empower veterans who are calling for the medicinal use of cannabis. Eighty-eight percent of IAVA members support the research of cannabis for medicinal purposes and 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. We thank Sens. Jon Tester and Dan Sullivan, and Reps. Jack Bergman and Lou Correa for reintroducing the Bi-partisan and Bicameral *VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act* in order to increase that research and reduce the stigma at VA. IAVA expresses great appreciation to the Senate VA Committee for passing the bill from your panel last month, and we encourage Congress to finally and expeditiously pass it into law.

Finally, but not the least of our priorities to address, I would like to express our significant concern as we observe conflicts on Capitol Hill over the level and scope of federal government spending. Veterans and military families have sacrificed, and are sacrificing, as a direct result of our nation's national security needs, and political disagreements over spending should never result in diminished care and benefits for our community. We ask all Members of Congress to pledge to stand against any spending cuts impacting veterans and military families, or any effort



that will make such cuts easier to enact, and we ask that as our chief advocates, your committees stand as a bulwark against those who would use us to achieve political and fiscal goals. Wars are expensive, and the wars do not stop when the servicemember returns home and we stop calling them wars. It takes sustained commitment and investment to follow through on our obligations as a nation to them. As we have often said at IAVA, “if you don’t like paying the cost of benefits for veterans, stop creating more of us.”

Again, thank you for inviting us here today to deliver our priorities for the 118th Congress. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Biography of Jeremy Butler

Jeremy Butler serves as IAVA’s Chief Executive Officer. Jeremy joined IAVA with 15+ years of experience providing substantive and strategic counsel to leaders in high-profile government and private sector offices, including the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. He is a graduate of Knox College and the U.S. Naval War College. Butler has recently contributed to NPR, Fox News, CNN, C-SPAN, Sirius XM, and other veteran and military media outlets. He is also a Surface Warfare Officer in the Navy Reserve with more than 20 years of uniformed service.