



Statement of Jeremy Butler
Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Before the
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

“S. 785: Leading the Way to Comprehensive Mental Health Care and Suicide Prevention for Veterans”

September 9, 2020

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Tester, and distinguished members of the Committee, 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.

For nearly a decade, IAVA and the veteran community has called for immediate action by our nation's leaders to appropriately respond to the crisis of over 20 military and veterans dying every day by suicide. Thanks to the courage and leadership of veterans, military family members and our allies, there has been progress.

Yet, the problem continues to loom. According to the most recent VA data, the youngest cohort of veterans, post-9/11 veterans aged 18 to 34, continue to have the highest rate of suicide. And while not always an indicator of suicide, mental health injuries continue to impact the post-9/11 generation disproportionately. In our latest Member Survey, a stunning 65% of IAVA members reported service-connected PTSD and over half report anxiety (65%) or depression (56%). Additionally, 65% of IAVA members know a post-9/11 veteran who attempted suicide. Sixty-Two percent know a post-9/11 veteran who died by suicide, an alarming 22% rise since 2014. Every day, we are losing more of our brothers and sisters to suicide. Now is not the time for America to let up. Instead, this is a time to redouble our efforts as a nation and answer the call to action. IAVA will continue to maintain our leadership on that charge.

In March of this year I testified before a joint hearing by the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees on IAVA's Big Six priorities for 2020. The number one issue for IAVA remains our Campaign to Combat Suicide and the centerpiece of that campaign - the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* (S. 785). IAVA is encouraged that this bill will bring even greater attention and resources to VA to combat the veteran suicide crisis. Key provisions of S. 785 include the creation of a community grant program within VA to help identify isolated veterans and provide mental health services. It establishes and expands partnerships with



organizations to deliver increased telehealth capabilities to veterans, which is critically important now more than ever. IAVA believes that the bill's investment into a number of studies, such as a study on Vet Centers' Readjustment Counselors efficacy, and increased number of tracking metrics to ensure that VA is providing the best possible mental health care, is critical to understanding the current suicide epidemic in our community. IAVA is also pleased with the focus of this legislation on studying the connection between traumatic brain injury (TBI) and mental health, including creating brain health bio markers to better track those who suffer from TBI. Over a quarter of IAVA members report suffering from TBI and these invisible wounds of war continue to be misunderstood. This legislation will not only create a center of excellence for TBI and PTSD, but also create brain health biomarkers to track servicemembers' and veterans' brain health.

IAVA is extremely proud to have worked with both Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Tester on this landmark legislation, and we thank them for their important leadership on this critical issue. In March I applauded this Committee on its unanimous passage of S. 785 and urged your House colleagues to follow and for the President to sign it into law. I am here today to reiterate our strong support for this legislation and to thank the Committee again for your support which led to unanimous passage out of the Senate a month ago.

IAVA believes that it would be completely irresponsible if the 116th Congress ends its legislative work this December without having at least passed the Commander Hannon Act. There has been plenty of talk but not nearly enough action to address the worsening crisis of veteran suicide and we are literally at a crossroads. 2020 can be the year where we joined together to pass much-needed legislation to take the next big step to combat veteran suicide.

IAVA is deeply concerned for the current path forward for the Commander Hannon Act to become law. While we appreciate the House Committee's well-intentioned efforts to add new provisions to the legislation, we have strong concerns that given the limited number of legislative days and the upcoming elections in November, there may not be enough time to negotiate and pass this legislation by the end of the year. We believe that the best and most responsible way forward for our nation's veterans is for the House to take up S. 785 as passed unanimously by the Senate. Following enactment, we encourage the Committees to consider additional provisions in a new package of legislation. We do not believe that our job will be done

Thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views and the importance of passing the *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* now. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and continuing working with the Committee in the future.