



Statement of Melissa Bryant
Chief Policy Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees

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Chairman Isakson, Chairman Roe, Ranking Members Tester and Walz, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members worldwide, thank you for the opportunity to share our policy priorities for 2018. Despite the nastiest, most divisive time in this town in recent memory, 2017 was a year when we all worked together, across partisan lines, to score several important legislative victories for veterans. Your committees showed what could be done if leaders put country ahead of politics and party.

But the waters are getting choppy. More than 3 million veterans have served since 9/11, the need for support is growing, and our VA is in crisis. There is much more to be done in the critical years ahead--and we look forward to working with you to lead the way for veterans--and all Americans.

I am here today not only as IAVA's Chief Policy Officer, but also as a former Army Captain and a combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was a military intelligence officer; I led men and women in combat, and I bore witness to the trauma and anguish several of my soldiers and friends endured when dealing with the physical and invisible wounds of war. And that is what drives me every day to do this work. It's what drives all of us.

For fourteen years, IAVA has been the leading empowerment organization for post-9/11 veterans. Since its beginning, IAVA has fought for and has been successful in advocating for beneficial policies that meet the needs of our generation of veterans. The issues we've cracked the seal on haven't always been popular in the beginning, but they always are by the end. Our members are the next generation, and continue to show not just what's happening, but what's coming next. Today, I am honored to be a voice for all of us who served in the "Forever Wars". And what we need now from America, is a forever commitment.

Our members have made their voices clear. They are diverse, they are determined, and they want results.



In 2018, IAVA will focus on six priorities that our members see as most pressing. This “Big Six” contains the challenges and opportunities that IAVA members care about most—and see as areas where we can uniquely make an impact. IAVA is building on our core four policy priorities from 2017, and elevating and introducing to the nation two long-standing issues that are extremely important to our community. Two issues will be in sustainment campaigns: suicide and women’s support. Two issues will be in defensive campaigns: defending our educational benefits and necessary, earned government support. Two issues will be initiated in full on the national stage for the first time by IAVA: toxic exposures/burn pits and medical cannabis. IAVA members are poised to educate the public, design solutions for positive impact, and lead the way to the future. That starts with our 2018 Big Six outlined below. Each campaign will drive toward outcomes in 4 key areas: 1) Public Awareness 2) Executive Action 3) Legislative Change 4) Local Support.

1. Sustain our Fight to Combat Suicide Among Troops and Veterans

For nearly a decade, IAVA and the veteran community has called for immediate action by our nation’s leaders to appropriately respond to this crisis of 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 tremendous progress. The issue of veteran suicide is now the subject of national conversation, increased media coverage, a reduction in stigma and a surge of government and private support. In 2015, IAVA and our partners jump-started a national dialogue. But the flood of need continues nationwide—and continues to rise. In our latest Member Survey, 65% of IAVA members knew a post-9/11 veteran who attempted suicide. 58% know a post-9/11 veteran that died by suicide. Every day, we are losing more of our brothers and sisters to suicide. This 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. And IAVA will continue to maintain our leadership on that charge.

The IAVA-led Campaign to Combat Suicide and the passage of the *Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act* in 2015 was a historic breach element—a huge first step. That effort alerted America to this national security, public health and moral crisis. Leaders from the military, government, the medical community, politics, sports and entertainment—all stepped up to help. The entire world watched on live television as Clay Hunt’s courageous personal story was told by the President, and the issue was elevated to a level never before seen, at a signing ceremony at the White House. Since then, IAVA has continued to push for awareness, support and action. We have continued to advocate in the media, testify on Capitol Hill, reach out on the ground and online to veterans nationwide, and vigilantly monitor the law’s implementation of the SAV Act by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). In 2017, we continued our fight to combat military and veteran suicide, and led a successful effort to remove a provision from the FY18 *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)* that would have established an oath to be taken by transitioning servicemembers to combat suicide. Although



well-intentioned, the provision had the potential to *increase* suicides. We also continued to spread public awareness for the suicide epidemic as thought leaders in panels, roundtable discussions with policymakers, and documentaries. Sobering statistics on suicide continue to be released, identifying women veterans at especially high risk of suicide. IAVA's groundbreaking Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP) continued to serve as a safety net for thousands--and continued to gather critical data on the growing and shifting wave of need and supportive services. But after a decade and a half of war, the need for reinforcements only continues to grow.

In 2018, IAVA will continue to monitor the progress in implementing the *Clay Hunt SAV Act*, and shed light on this epidemic as thought leaders on this issue. We will hold the VA and Department of Defense (DoD) accountable to create an effective joint plan of action to provide expanded mental health services for servicemembers transitioning out of uniform, as directed by Executive Order in January 2018.

2. Sustain our Fight to Recognize and Improve Services for Women Veterans

In 2017, IAVA launched our groundbreaking campaign, #SheWhoBorneTheBattle, focused on recognizing the service of women veterans and closing gaps in care provided to them by the VA. While many other organizations waited or chose other issues, we made the bold choice to lead on an issue that was important to not just the 13% of our members that are women, but to our entire membership, the future of healthcare and America's national security. We fought hard for top-down culture change in the VA for the more than 345,000 women who have fought in our current wars--and for all Americans.

IAVA championed the bipartisan *Deborah Sampson Act*, comprehensive legislation aimed at improving VA services for women veterans, which now boasts dozens of cosponsors from both parties in the Senate and House. We deployed a media blitzkrieg, bringing much needed public awareness to the plight of women veterans, reaching more than 21 million people in traditional media and another 60 million on social media. And we backed important bills like the *PRIVATE Act*, in the wake of the Marines United scandal, which explicitly prohibits servicemembers from sharing intimate media without consent and strengthens military law to better enable prosecutions and passed into law as part of the NDAA. By the end of 2017, the #MeToo movement exploded across America, including a sub-movement for #MeTooMilitary, as military sexual assault and military sexual trauma continues to plague our community. IAVA's latest Member Survey showed that 35% of IAVA women and 1% of IAVA men are survivors of military sexual assault.

2018 is a watershed moment for equality in American history, with an unprecedented number of women running for public office in the midterm elections, and we will ensure #SheWhoBorneTheBattle remains a priority in the national conversation and in all policymaking.



This year, IAVA will continue our public awareness campaign, #SheWhoBorneTheBattle, to bring greater cultural understanding of the increasing contributions of women service members, as well as push for passage of the *Deborah Sampson Act* into law. We will also continue to press the Secretary of the VA to change the outdated motto of the VA to be inclusive of all who have worn the uniform.

3. Defend Veteran and Military Education Benefits

In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill was created and supported with IAVA leadership and has now sent more than one million veterans to school, and remains one of the military's best retention and recruiting tools. Last year, IAVA worked with VSO partners to pass the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act*, which included numerous expansions for the GI Bill, including elimination of the 15-year time limit to use the benefit.

But the GI Bill is constantly under threat of cuts by Congress, which is why IAVA continues to #DefendTheGIBill. IAVA swiftly defeated a ridiculous attempt in 2017 to establish a \$2,400 fee for new servicemembers to access the benefit, resulting in the final version of the #ForeverGIBill providing the same expansions, but without establishing an absurd user fee. However, the GI Bill is still being exploited by predators in the for-profit education sector who take advantage of veterans' benefits and often leave veterans stuck with unnecessary debt and a subpar education. And we must continue to hold the line in defending these essential, earned benefits that are a cost of war. Veterans deserve better quality controls in GI Bill oversight.

In 2018, IAVA and a coalition of several VSOs will push Congress to close loopholes that reward these bad actors who defraud veterans and strengthen regulations that help veterans choose the best educational programs to meet their career goals. We will continue to steadfastly defend the GI Bill against any cuts, waste or abuse, and we will support efforts to elevate education and economic opportunity benefits like the GI Bill to the VA Undersecretary level.

4. Defend and Reform Government Support for Today's Veterans

Since the 2014 Phoenix scandal exposed many VA problems across the country, IAVA has been a leader in the fight to drive accountability. We supported empowering the VA Secretary with the tools to expedite the removal of employees who harm veterans, and following advocacy by IAVA and our VSO partners, the *Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act* was finally signed into law in 2017. IAVA also worked with our VSO partners to finally reform and streamline the VA's disability appeals process with passage of the *Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act*. The VA "Choice" Program still lingers, and IAVA banded together with our VSO partners to defeat on the House floor an extension that would have ignored critical VA needs by pulling money away from other core services to fund this controversial, unproven public policy experiment. In the wake of the defeat of that



proposal, IAVA succeeded in helping to pass a Choice funding extension that did not compromise investment in VA foundational services and hiring.

But the fight for government reform and the defense of the core VA services we count on is even more pressing in 2018. The last "Choice" extension granted in December 2017 will run out of money in late spring/early summer 2018, and bipartisan legislation IAVA and VSOs support to permanently reform and consolidate the VA's community care programs, including the "Choice" program has stalled. Additionally, the DoD FY18 budget has been particularly hamstrung by multiple continuing resolutions - which only continue funding at the previous year's levels in the absence of a year-long bill - since the beginning of FY17, greatly harming military readiness and national security. At the very least, funding and key structures at the VA and DoD must be protected from short-sighted cuts and political posturing.

IAVA will push hard in 2018 for compromises to end political stalemates that disparately impact our military and veteran community.

5. Initiate Support for Injuries from Burn Pits and other Toxic Exposures

Our members have made it clear: 2018 is the year IAVA will educate Americans about burn pits and airborne toxic exposures and the devastating potential impact they could be having on the health and welfare of millions of Post-9/11 veterans and their families. According to IAVA's most recent member survey, 80% of respondents were exposed to burn pits during their deployments and over 60% of those exposed reported having symptoms. Burn pits were a common way to get rid of waste at military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly between 2001 and 2010. There are other hazards beyond burn pits that occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan that may pose danger for respiratory illnesses, including high levels of fine dust and exposure to other airborne hazards. Year after year, we have seen an upward trend in the number of members reporting symptoms associated with burn pit exposure. IAVA will sound the alarm for all Americans: *burn pits could be the Agent Orange for our generation of veterans.*

In 2017, an IAVA-backed provision was included in the NDAA to require the VA to coordinate efforts related to burn pit-related diseases and effective treatments for those diseases. While this provision is a step forward, we'll continue to fight for more resources to address burn pit and toxic exposure issues.

In 2018, IAVA will advocate for increased funding for research into the association between toxic exposures, burn pits, and diseases expected to be associated with such exposure. We want to ensure that VA clinicians are trained to query and identify illnesses tied to toxic exposure. Currently, the VA's Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pits registry is self selected; from our latest member survey only 35% of IAVA members exposed to burn pits are registered. There should be mandatory screening for toxic exposure for all veterans entering VA, similar to the screenings conducted for Military Sexual Assault. Lastly, we recommend requiring DoD to identify all those exposed to



burn pits and other toxins both at bases in CONUS or while deployed and work with the VA to proactively reach out to encourage enrollment in the Burn Pit and Airborne Hazards Registry.

6. Initiate Empowerment of Veterans Who Want to Utilize Cannabis

IAVA veterans have sounded off and clearly demanded: 2018 is the year we will be heard on this important and emerging health issue. 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. 38% of IAVA members surveyed have reported to us that they suffer from chronic pain, 46% with PTSD, over 40% for both anxiety and depression, and 19% for traumatic brain injury. Policies are outdated, research is lacking, and stigma persists. In 2018, IAVA members will set out to change that and launch a national conversation underscoring the need for bipartisan, data-based, common-sense solutions that can bring relief to millions, save taxpayers billions and create thousands of jobs for veterans nationwide. Those solutions must include the approval of medical cannabis for every veteran in America who needs it.

The national debate around approving cannabis for medical purposes reached a fever pitch in 2017. Twenty-nine states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam have changed laws permitting medical cannabis. And consistently over time, a high majority of IAVA survey respondents have supported or do not oppose the legalization of cannabis for medical use. In our latest Member Survey, only 15% opposed legalization for medical use. The youngest of the Post-9/11 generation are most supportive; with about three-fourths of IAVA members under 35 supporting the allowance of medical marijuana. Across party lines, medical cannabis is largely unopposed.

However, despite strong support from across all geographies, generations and political backgrounds of veterans, progress on this issue with the VA has been slow and incremental--and lags behind the needs of veterans and the changing reality of state-level laws. In late 2017, the Veterans Health Administration issued a policy change which urged patients to discuss medical marijuana use with their doctors. The shift allows doctors and patients to determine what, if any, effect cannabis use might have on treatment plans. This policy change alleviates previous concern that admitting to cannabis use could jeopardize VA benefits, a policy recommendation noted in IAVA's Policy Agenda. But VA physicians still cannot refer patients to legally sanctioned state medical cannabis programs because of the federal prohibition. Moreover, patients are not allowed to have any cannabis on VA property, even if it is medically prescribed to them and the state they are living in allows it. And VA employees are still barred from using any form of cannabis, including medical cannabis, while roughly one-third of VA employees are veterans and may want access to cannabis as a treatment option.

Further, in opposition to strong and rising popular opinion across the veterans community, the VA Secretary announced in early 2018 that the VA will *not* conduct research into whether medical cannabis could help veterans suffering from PTSD and



chronic pain. This is despite protest from many in the VSO community who posit medical cannabis could serve as an alternative to opioids and antidepressants. A January 2017 National Academy of Sciences study that stated: there was “conclusive or substantial” evidence that cannabis is effective in treating chronic pain, moderate evidence that cannabis helps with sleep (there is additional research that shows the link between lack of sleep and suicidal ideation), limited evidence in improving anxiety symptoms, and limited evidence in improving PTSD symptoms.

IAVA members under 35 years old showed the most support for legalizing recreational marijuana, with only about 30% opposing it.

IAVA will join select VSO partners in 2018 to amplify the voices of our collective members and urge Congress and the VA to pass and implement common sense legislation and policy sanctioning the use of medical cannabis by veterans. We will push to close the loopholes in VA policy which inhibit the discussion of cannabis usage between veterans and VA clinicians; current VA medical cannabis policy should be updated to allow for VA clinicians to provide recommendations and opinions to patients regarding medical cannabis programs. We urge the VA to conduct research into the use of medical cannabis as a treatment option for chronic pain and mental health injuries. IAVA also calls on Congress to pass legislation to reclassify marijuana as a Schedule III drug from a Schedule I drug. Finally, IAVA calls for support to Senate FY 2018 Commerce/Justice/Science Appropriations (S. 1662/Sect. 538) language that prohibits the Department of Justice from preventing implementation of state cannabis access laws, including for medical purposes.

IAVA’s “Big Six” I’ve presented today represents the issues our members are focused on most. And they are the issues you, the President, the media and all Americans must focus on as well. The time for action is now. We are ready to act, and we are ready to work with you to deliver results for our members--and for the future of our community--and the future of our country.

I come from military legacy family. My grandfather was an Army Sergeant killed in action in World War II; he is buried in an American Cemetery and Memorial in Florence, Italy. My father began his Army career as an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam (and later retired after 27 years of service). My father administered the oath of office to me when I was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Army--I keep a framed copy of my DA 71 bearing his signature in my office. In 1968, somewhere between Pleiku and Hue, my father’s platoon passed through a strip of land running alongside a river that was completely defoliated with Agent Orange. And nearly 50 years to the day later, my father still suffers from the effects of Agent Orange--just as I still feel the health impacts from breathing in the putrid stench and smoke of open-air burn pits which operated 24/7 while I was in Baghdad a decade ago. Who knows the health challenges I’ll face in 40 more years.



My family intimately knows the sacrifices of war. And my generation is still suffering from the consequences of the “Forever Wars”. Just like those who came before us, we need our government to support us. And I call on you, on behalf of IAVA’s more than 425,000 members, to work with IAVA in 2018 to bring about real change in the lives of post-9/11 veterans. Thank you for your time.

Biography of Melissa Bryant

Melissa Bryant is the Chief Policy Officer for IAVA. She leads IAVA’s policy division, overseeing the legislative, research, and intergovernmental affairs departments. Melissa spearheads the development of our annual policy agenda and advocacy campaigns in collaboration with IAVA leadership, and leads IAVA’s engagement with the White House, government departments and agencies, particularly the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, Veteran and Military Service Organizations, and advocacy organizations.

A former Army Captain and Operation Iraqi Freedom combat veteran, Melissa has an extensive record of public service, having served on both active duty and in the civil service as an intelligence officer prior to joining IAVA. A plans, policy, and operations expert with 15 combined years of experience in the federal government, she has served in key leadership positions with the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Joint Staff, the United States Military Academy, and Army Intelligence. She was successful in building “coalitions of the willing” to advance operational and strategic objectives while developing and implementing plans and policy for the defense and intelligence communities.

Melissa is an ROTC Distinguished Military Graduate and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science cum laude from Hampton University, is an alumna of Howard University School of Law, and also holds a Master of Arts in Policy Management from Georgetown University.