



Statement of Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
for the hearing entitled
**“The Effect of Government Shutdown on
VA Benefits and Services to Veterans”**

October 9, 2013

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), I would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share with you our views, thoughts, and concerns regarding the ongoing government shutdown and its impact on the ability of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide benefits and services to America's veterans.

IAVA is the nation's first and largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their supporters. Founded in 2004, our mission is critically important but simple – to improve the lives of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families. With a steadily growing base of nearly 270,000 members and supporters, we strive to help create a society that honors and supports veterans of all generations.

In partnership with other veteran service organizations (VSOs), IAVA has worked tirelessly to see that veterans' needs and concerns are appropriately addressed by the VA. IAVA has fought hard over the years to not only hold the VA accountable on its promises to our nation's veterans, but also to ensure that veterans are fully aware of the status of operations within VA.

Lately, however, the political climate in Washington has made doing this a very difficult task. Congress, VSOs, and the public have often received incomplete, inaccurate, and/or inconsistent information from the administration and the VA about how the government shutdown would impact veterans and VA services. These inconsistencies have left veterans confused, concerned, and dismayed.

Since the federal government shutdown began, IAVA has fielded countless calls and received numerous emails, tweets, and Facebook messages from veterans all over the country asking about the impact of the shutdown on their benefits and services. We have heard from a number of veterans who rely on disability and GI Bill benefits and don't know if they'll get their next check. In fact, demand for education resources at IAVA has tripled in just a week.

One recent call came from a female veteran who is 100% disabled with three kids and no savings. If she does not receive her November disability check on time, she worries that she will not be able to pay her rent and electric bill or even buy food for her family. She shared that several other veterans she knows in her own hometown are in the same situation as she is, and they all are worried about what is yet to come.

Another IAVA member veteran recently relayed that he had applied for a VA home loan and had already received his Certificate of Eligibility and appraisal for the home he purchased when his mortgage lender indicated that it may not be able to proceed with the loan due to the government shutdown. While VA's most updated version of its public guidance on the shutdown states that VA home loan processing should not be impacted by a lapse in appropriations, this veteran's story is evidence of a common concern we are starting to see: the impact of uncertainty and doubt on businesses that interact with veterans and impact their lives and livelihoods.

Stories such as these are only the tip of the iceberg. We also hear from veterans who are furloughed federal government employees, veterans unsure of what a new wave of furloughs at VA means for services on which they rely, and veterans in the VA disability claims backlog who are worried that their wait will be even longer.

In recent months, we have seen a significant and laudable reduction in the backlog, due in part to a variety of factors such as the special claims processing initiatives, veterans filing more fully developed claims with the guidance of VSO service officers, mandatory overtime for VA claims processors, media attention, and public pressure. But if the shutdown continues, we may not only see a slowdown of this trend, but a potential reversal of the trend. This would represent a major setback for the VA, for veterans, and for the country.

The men and women who served our nation did their jobs without question and without delay, and those currently serving continue to perform their duties even while questions about whether or not our government will default on its commitment to compensate and care for them and their families. IAVA urges Congress to end this standoff and will restore funding to the government so that it can properly and fully serve our nation's veteran population.

Veterans are hurting during the shutdown. They need the shutdown to end so they can receive and benefit from the services and support they have earned. But until

Congress can re-open the government, our veterans deserve clear, reliable, and accurate information.

Mr. Chairman, IAVA again appreciates the opportunity to offer our views on this important topic, and we look forward to continuing to work with each of you, your staff, and this Committee to continue to improve the lives of veterans and their families.

Thank you for your time and attention.