



Statement for the Record
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Wednesday, June 23, 2016

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by Elizabeth Welke, J.D
Director (acting), Political and Intergovernmental Affairs
of the
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Brown and Members of the Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our views on pending legislation, including the "*VA Appeals Modernization Act*" (H.R. 5083), the *Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act*" (H.R. 4764), and the *Protecting Veterans' Educational Choice Act* (H.R. 5047), *Authorizing the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial in Marne-la-Coquette, France* (H.R. 5420), and the *No Veterans Crisis Line Call Should Go Unanswered Act* (H.R. 5392)

VA Appeals Modernization Act of 2016 (H.R. 5083)

Over the past few months, IAVA has worked collaboratively and intensely with the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) and other key stakeholders in order to develop a new appeals process framework. The ideal process would provide quicker, more accurate decisions for veterans and family members seeking benefits based on their military service, and provide more options to resolve appeals quickly, while fully protecting veterans' rights in the claims and appeals process.

IAVA is optimistic that the *VA Appeals Modernization Act of 2016* (H.R. 5083) could greatly improve the appeals process and provide veterans with a number of options at both VBA and BVA. It would enable veterans to choose the most appropriate venue based on their individual circumstances. However, one critical issue must be fully addressed to make this new system successful is that the VBA and BVA must address the 440,000 current appeals that are pending. Pending appeals must be resolved for any new appeals system to be successful.

Oversight by Congress will be necessary to ensure these legacy appeals are properly handled and resolved. IAVA applauds the VA, partner VSOs and this Committee for pushing forward an attempt to modernize an appeals system that has become laden by bureaucracy and is not at all beneficial to veterans. By continuing to collaborate, it is possible to reach comprehensive appeals reform this year, and H.R. 5083 is the perfect place to start.



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Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act of 2016 (H.R. 4764)

The demand for service dogs, trained to assist disabled veterans with daily tasks, is on the rise as veterans are seeking a more comprehensive approach to care. In IAVA's Member Survey, nearly 20 percent of respondents indicated they are using animal-assisted therapies, which includes, but is not limited to, service dogs as part of their care regimen. IAVA members continue to rely on service dogs and find them to be an essential part of their recovery. The VA currently has a research program underway to further examine the potential benefits of psychological service dogs for veterans which was mandated by Congress in 2010. However, the research has been plagued by delays, and the new estimated completion date is some time in 2018. While IAVA is a huge proponent of research, we also recognize the need for more immediate action.

IAVA applauds former U.S. Marine Corps Corporal and Afghanistan veteran Cole Lyle, a major proponent of the PAWS Act, for his efforts to underscore this problem and the importance of finding a solution. With his service dog Kaya, who helps him overcome the struggles of PTSD, Lyle has been tirelessly walking the halls of Congress to make the case for expanding the available treatment options for post-9/11 veterans carrying the invisible burden of post-traumatic stress.

We would like to also thank Congressman DeSantis and his staff for their energy and dedication to improving the lives of veterans like Cole Lyle through legislation proposing a five-year pilot program under which the VA shall provide service dogs and veterinary health insurance to post-9/11 veterans with PTSD.

IAVA strongly supports the goals of this legislation and see it as a good first step. We encourage the VA and this Committee to work with Mr. Lyle and Congressman DeSantis toward establishing a workable pilot program that will lead to a lasting VA effort to accommodate and expand the treatment options involving service dogs.

However, IAVA is concerned by the provision included in this legislation that limits providing service dogs only to veterans who have gone through therapy and with no improvement. If the funding is available, IAVA would prefer that qualified veterans receive the service dog as complementary therapy. We also feel the program would be more beneficial if the participating veterans were required to go through a more rigorous mental health treatment plan that would incorporate evidence-based treatments with a qualified provider. This would allow the pilot to better determine the role of the service dog in assisting recovery, a question yet unanswered by research and that is extremely important to understanding the contribution of service dogs in the context of a larger treatment program.

We commend this legislation for setting a standard for organizations providing service dogs, despite our concerns the standards have been set too broad. IAVA recognizes a need for a rigorous standard for service dogs as there are a number of service dog organizations advertising their services to the military and veteran communities. Some of these organizations do a fantastic job of training high quality assistance animals, but others do not. Anecdotally, we have heard from veterans their experiences receiving less than qualified dogs and the negative



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impact it had on their family and their health. We encourage Congress and the Obama Administration, working with experts in the mental health and service dog communities, to better define a gold standard these dogs must meet and consider a certification process that can remove some of the uncertainty.

IAVA is also concerned about the impacts of funding the measure with \$10 million from the VA's Office of Human Resources and Administration. With the enormous personnel challenges the VA currently faces, we would like to know from the VA exactly how personnel operations would be impacted with this proposed readjustment. As this is the second iteration of a funding source for the bill, any final provision must not subtract funds from existing earned critical veterans services or benefits, like the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

As this bill to improve service dog legislation moves forward IAVA would like to know from the VA how many veterans under agency care with PTSD rated at a severity level of three or four would be eligible to benefit under this bill, and how the agency is evaluating the difference between service and emotional support dogs.

Due to their widespread appeal and apparent benefit to veterans, the VA should invest in further research and outreach to clarify and expand the use of service dogs.

Protecting Veterans' Educational Choice Act (H.R. 5047)

Over one million veterans have gone to school under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. As a critical readjustment benefit, the Post-9/11 GI Bill not only helps veterans transition back home, but invests in veterans who go on to build and strengthen the US economy. Though a widely successful benefit, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been exploited by some schools to prey on veterans while providing a subpar education with credits that cannot be transferred to other schools.

This proposed legislation would require education counseling to include information about articulation agreements, which would aim to help better educate veterans about the realities of transferring credits from one program to another. Articulation agreements are agreements between institutions that identify which credits from one specific program can be transferred to another institution.

We have heard that some schools are misrepresenting articulation agreements and leaving veterans with unusable credits and wasted GI Bill benefits. With the wealth of advertising directed towards veterans and school options available to student veterans, it is important that the VA educational counseling services provide information that will best inform veterans of the long term implications and credit transferability of certain programs. Requiring educational counseling to include articulation agreement information for schools being considered by a student veteran will aid in informed decision making by veterans looking to use their GI Bill benefits.

Defending the Post-9/11 GI Bill is a top priority for IAVA and its members, and because of this, IAVA supports the *Protecting Veterans' Educational Choice Act*. In addition to defending the GI



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Bill from cuts to this earned benefit, it is also important to defend it from fraud and abuse. Ensuring bad actors are identified and veterans are informed about the realities of the school will only strengthen the GI Bill's ability to advance the success of veterans.

Authorizing the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial in Marne-la-Coquette, France (H.R. 5420)

As we approach the centennial of America's involvement in World War I (WWI), it is important for us as a nation to honor the sacrifices of the men and women sent to Europe for the "Great War". With over 100,000 Americans killed and over 200,000 wounded, the impact of WWI should be honored and memorialized. This memorial in particular will honor a truly courageous group of Americans who were willing to support the French effort in WWI as pilots prior to the U.S. entering the war.

IAVA honors the service and sacrifice of the veterans who came before us, and therefore supports H.R. 5420. The formal recognition of this memorial comes after the passing of all American veterans of WWI, but with this memorial, we can continue to honor their memory.

This should also be a lesson in not waiting too long to provide a place for veterans and their families to honor and reflect on the service of our nation's veterans.

Only 22 percent of IAVA members who responded to our Member Survey felt that the American public understands the sacrifice of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families. This number is far too low, and this perception must change. Service members and veterans need to feel supported by the American public, and it's up to the American public to deliver on this.

More than 6,000 service members have given their lives for this country in Iraq and Afghanistan. The nation must first honor these men and women by supporting their families who are left behind. Furthermore, the time has come for our nation to honor the sacrifice of our fallen post-9/11 troops with a memorial on the National Mall. A monument will give families and veterans a place to gather and mourn, giving the nation an enduring reminder of the heroism of our military and the sacrifices made.

The new generation of veterans shouldn't wait years to see a memorial in their honor, as those who served in Vietnam and World War II were forced to do. An overwhelming 82 percent of IAVA members support the creation of a memorial and are ready to galvanize all Americans in support.

No Veterans Crisis Line Call Should Go Unanswered Act (H.R. 5392)

While IAVA applauds the intent of the *No Veterans Crisis Line Should Go Unanswered Act*, and strongly agrees no crisis call should go unanswered, we would like suggest the need to better understand existing quality control standards at the VA's crisis call centers as they currently stand. We would also like to understand how such standards are enforced and monitored before introducing potentially conflicting or duplicative quality control standards.



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Since there are existing quality standards already in place for VA crisis line call centers, we believe there should be questions answered before layering additional requirements on the VA. Are these standards being enforced? Are they being met? Do these standards apply to contracted call centers, as well? Are the existing standards strict enough to ensure no veteran's call goes unanswered?

There is no question that more work is needed to ensure access to quality mental health care and suicide prevention measures at the VA and within local communities, but we must try to prevent conflicting and duplicative requirements, when possible, to prevent further confusion and bureaucratic red tape slowing down access to care.

More concerning is the decision to move the Veterans Crisis Line from under the directorship of the VA Suicide Prevention Office to VA Member Services. Since this change was made at the start of 2016, we have seen no indication of the impact of this reorganization. Our concern is that, while Member Services oversees all of the call centers at VA, the VCL is the only call center with a clinical component and we worry that removing clinical oversight will have dire consequences. While there is no question that the operational component of the VCL needs improvement, IAVA is concerned that the VA has overcorrected in this management shift. We ask Congress to investigate this matter further, and urge the VA to consider shifting management back to the Suicide Prevention Office with consultation on operations from Member Services or another appropriate entity.

In closing, IAVA would again like to thank this Committee for its leadership and continued commitment to our veterans. We reaffirm our commitment to working with Congress, VA and our VSO partners to ensure veterans have access to the highest quality care available and that our country fulfills its sacred obligation to care for those who have borne the battle.



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Biography of Elizabeth Welke, J.D.

As acting Director of Political and Intergovernmental Affairs, Ms. Welke supports the development of IAVA's annual policy agenda and advocacy campaigns through trusted relationships with Veteran Service Organizations and government agencies. Elizabeth received her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA and has a J.D. from Regent University School of Law, Virginia Beach, VA. She is the proud wife of a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2005-2006.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Ms. Welke, nor the organization she represents, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, have received federal grant or contract funds relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or past two fiscal years.