



Statement of Jeremy Butler
Before the House Veterans Affairs Committee
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Chief Executive Officer
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
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Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and 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 submit my statement for today's hearing record.

For nearly a decade, IAVA and the veteran community have called for action by Congress to 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 and friends, 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.

This past March, I testified before a joint hearing by the House and Senate 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.

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 believes that it would be completely irresponsible if the 116th Congress ends its legislative work this December without having at least passed S. 785.

IAVA is deeply concerned for the current path forward for S. 785 to become law. While we appreciate your 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 November elections, 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 work with VSOs and consider additional provisions in a new package of legislation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on 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.



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, to include 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 Reserves with 20 years of uniformed service.