



Statement of Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans Of America
before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health
for the hearing on
Pending Legislation

November 19, 2014

Bill #	Bill Name	Sponsor	Position
H.R. 4720	Medal of Honor Priority Care Act	Rep. Walberg	Support
H.R. 4977	Creating Options for Veterans Expedited Recovery Act	Rep. Bilirakis	Support
H.R. 5059	Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act	Rep. Walz	Support
H.R. 5475	A bill to improve the care provided by the Secretary of the VA to newborn children.	Rep. Collins	Support
H.R. 5484	Toxic Exposure Research Act	Rep. Benishek	Support
H.R.4887	Expanding Care for Veterans Act	Rep. Brownley	Support

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), we would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share with you our views and recommendations regarding these important pieces of legislation.

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 (VSO), IAVA has worked tirelessly to see that veterans' needs and concerns are appropriately addressed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and by Congress. IAVA appreciates the efforts put forth by this Subcommittee to address the issues and challenges facing our nation's



veterans and their families. We stand with you in supporting legislation to continue improving the services offered by VA, empowering veterans to improve their lives after military service, and ensuring that veterans are fully aware of all the benefits available to them as our nation begins transitioning away from more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. IAVA is, therefore, able to offer its support to the bills that are the subject of this hearing today because we believe their adoption would better enable the VA to live up to its commitment on behalf of the American people.

H.R. 4720

IAVA supports H.R. 4720, the Medal of Honor Priority Care Act, which would place Medal of Honor recipients in the highest priority group for VA care.

Currently, Medal of Honor recipients are in priority group 3 under the VA's priority group system. While these recipients represent a very small population of veterans, their courage, valor and sacrifice under the most harrowing circumstances should be met with timely VA care.

H.R. 4977

IAVA supports H.R. 4977, the Creating Options for Veterans Expedited Recovery (COVER) Act, which would establish a Commission to examine complementary and alternative treatments for PTSD and evaluate current evidence-based models for treating mental health issues that veterans are experiencing.

Establishing the Commission to review VA's treatment models is an important step forward in increasing access to quality healthcare for veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade. Complementary and Alternative therapies can go a long way to aid veterans in their readjustment to civilian life. The results of the surveys that the Commission will conduct will be valuable as VA looks at how it should continue to adapt to meet the needs of veterans.

H.R. 5059

IAVA supports HR 5059, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act, which is comprehensive legislation aimed at expanding and improving care and services provided to veterans and service members with mental health injuries or those risk of suicide.

Combating veteran suicide is IAVA's top priority in 2014. In IAVA's 2014 Member Policy Survey, over 47% of our respondents told us they knew a veteran who served in Iraq or Afghanistan who had attempted suicide, and over 52% knew two or more veterans who had died by suicide. Additionally, data from the VA also indicate that at least 22 veterans die by suicide every day.

Congress must invest in improving suicide prevention programs and mental health services to help reduce the number of suicides among troops and veterans. The Clay



Hunt SAV Act would begin to create a comprehensive approach to mental health care and suicide prevention programs at the VA and DoD. Specifically...

This legislation will also require the DoD to review discharges for individuals that were unjustly separated with a service-connected mental health injury or disorder. Our military has unjustly discharged thousands of individuals with service-connected mental health injuries or disorders. Now these veterans are ineligible for many VA programs. A review of these records will provide access to care and mental health support for veterans that have been unjustly denied services and support.

Veterans and service members should also receive high quality, evidence-based care. In the past few years, hundreds of mental health services and suicide prevention programs have been implemented at the DoD and the VA. However, these programs are not always properly evaluated to find out what's working and what's not working. This legislation would require a yearly review of all suicide prevention programs to make sure programs are effective and producing results.

IAVA recognizes that there is no one solution to combating veteran suicide. However, this comprehensive legislation is a starting point that addresses many areas of care aimed at reversing the alarming trend. We look forward to working with this Subcommittee on strengthening the mental health care services and suicide prevention programs available to veterans and service members.

H.R. 5475

IAVA supports H.R. 5475, which would authorize newborn children born in VA hospitals to stay up to 14 days after birth. Newborn children born to mothers in VA hospitals are currently authorized to remain under VA care for 7 days after birth. However, infant illnesses and complications after birth can often leave newborns needing additional care. Authorizing this 7-day increase in care will provide a greater continuity of care for newborns.

H.R. 5484

IAVA supports H.R. 5484, the Toxic Exposure Research Act, which would establish a national center for research focused on the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions faced by veterans, and descendants of veterans exposed to toxic substances during military service.

This center, at the will of participants, would be able to conduct studies and research on individuals or their descendants whom have been exposed to toxic substances during military service. The legislation additionally directs the Secretary to establish an advisory board to assist the national center on medical issues relating to these toxic exposures.

Studying and understanding the long-term health of our newer veterans who may have been exposed to toxic chemicals while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan is an important



step that will better prepare VA to address their health needs in the future.

H.R. 4887

IAVA supports H.R. 4887, the Expanding Care for Veterans Act, which would expand research and education on the delivery of complementary and alternative treatments for veterans.

The requirements of this legislation would mandate VA develop a plan to expand its scope of research, delivery, and integration of complementary and alternative medicines to veterans. Veterans deserve to have access to a broad variety of treatments to assist in their readjustment to civilian life. Veterans often have individual needs that can require a diverse set of treatment solutions. This legislation would increase the availability of veterans to seek unique treatments.

Mr. Chairman, we at IAVA again appreciate the opportunity to offer our views on these important pieces of legislation, and we look forward to continuing to work with each of you, your staff, and the Committee to improve the lives of veterans and their families.

Thank you for your time and attention.



**Biography of Christopher Neiweem
Legislative Associate, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**

As Legislative Associate, Christopher maintains Congressional relationships and supports advocacy programs. Chris spent 6 years in the U.S. Army Reserve as a military police NCO and served a tour of duty in 2003 during Operation Iraqi Freedom detaining Enemy Prisoners of War (EPWs), and performing base security and customs in during the Iraq war. He completed a Bachelors Degree in political science from Northern Illinois University in 2007 and completed a Masters Degree in 2011 from the University of Illinois at Springfield in political affairs.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Mr. Neiweem, nor the organization he represents, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, has received federal grant or contract funds relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or past two fiscal years.