



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

July 14, 2015

Bill #	Bill Name	Sponsor	IAVA Position
H.R. 1862	Veterans Credit Protection Act	Rep. Boustany	Supports
H.R. 272	Medal of Honor Priority Care Act	Rep. Walberg	Supports
H.R. 353	Veterans' Access to Hearing Health Act	Rep. Duffy	Supports
H.R. 359	Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act	Rep. Stivers	Supports
H.R. 421	Classified Veterans Access to Care Act	Rep. Sinema	Supports
H.R. 423	Newborn Care Improvement Act	Rep. Collins	Supports
H.R.1356	Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act	Rep. Coffman	Supports
H.R.1688	Amend Title 38 to Provide Graduate Optometry Positions	Rep. Denham	Supports
H.R. 2464	Demanding Accountability for Veterans Act	Rep. Benishek	Supports
H.R. 2914	Build a Better VA Act	Rep. Brownley	Supports
H.R. 2915	Female Veteran Suicide Prevention Act	Rep. Brownley	Supports
H.R. 3016	Amend Title 38 to clarify the role of Podiatrists at VA	Rep. Wenstrup	Supports
Draft Bill	Construction Reform Act	Rep. Miller	Supports



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

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our nearly 400,000 Members and Supporters, we would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share with you our views and recommendations regarding these important pieces of legislation.

The two most pressing topics that our members continue to urge action on, as I sit before you today Mr. Chairman, are enhancements to the care and services we provide our female veterans and restoring trust at the VA by getting real accountability processes in place.

Just over a year ago, the VA wait-list scandal at the Phoenix VA hospital shook the veterans community. Whistleblowers came forward to reveal some employees engaged in conduct that was unacceptable and Congress responded with the VACAA Act to empower VA to clean up its issues.

While the health care access issues have seemingly improved through recent Choice Program legislative fixes, the issue of accountability is still looming large. When are our veterans going to be able to clearly, and with confidence, feel the VA is taking decisive action to remove employees that engage in misconduct?

This is why IAVA supports the VA Accountability Act, which gives Secretary McDonald the authority he asked for and is needed to remove poor performers in the workforce so the vast majority of hard-working VA employees do not need to have their hard work overshadowed by headlines describing the problems created by a few bad actors.

These bills relating to VA Construction reform here today are unfortunately needed so the recent mess of cost overruns in Denver are not repeated and veterans can expect projects to be completed on time and those that fail to perform to standard do not evade



corrective action or removal.

There are two prevailing arguments designed to stymie and oppose the VA Accountability Act and more strict oversight measures, such as these VA construction bills here today and both are dead-wrong.

The first is that the legislation itself provides a demoralizing effect on the VA workforce and the second is career professionals seeking federal opportunities will avoid working at the VA because they perceive to have less protections and that somehow their due process rights are no longer valid if this law is enacted.

The previous work experience of our IAVA staff extends to the private sector, non-profit sector, and U.S. military, and in each and every company and organization there is always a process in place for removing individuals that continue to perform poorly. This bill would not remove the protections that federal employees deserve, it simply removes the seemingly endless process of inaction relating to problematic employees that has veterans fed up.

The hard-working VA employees that positively impact veterans, like my husband Brian, on a daily basis deserve all the credit in the world and serve veterans because they share our values. The idea that professionals seeking careers at the VA will not choose to serve our veterans because the VA Secretary can take action to remove employees engaged in misconduct is a pre-phoenix mentality our Members fundamentally disagree with. The status-quo is not working and our veterans need results. More than 50% of our members in a recent health care survey reported utilizing VA services, and in order to continue to promote a top-notch workforce, Secretary McDonald needs to go all in on this bill and urge real accountability now.

Accountability at the VA is of utmost importance in order to improve the overall quality of care veterans receive and to bolster trust with the veterans it serves. However, accountability need not only apply to the employees of VA, but also to the system that cares for our female veterans.



As a country, we need to be better at fully acknowledging the service of female veterans, and the VA needs to better incorporate the needs of female veterans into their changing policies. Of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, 12% are women. Because this number continues to rapidly increase every year, their healthcare requirements will only continue to grow.

Out of the Iraq and Afghanistan female veteran population, 57% receive care from the VA; however, the VA is still failing to provide some of the most basic of fundamental female health care services. While the VA has made some progress in this area, there are still VA facilities without gynecological services, or private exam rooms and check-in areas.

The needs of female veterans is a top priority for IAVA and one in which we have dedicated much attention to over the past year. Our team conducted a nationwide tour, where dozens of female veterans from nine cities spoke to us about their issues and concerns. What we have learned is VA care is continuing to improve and evolve. However, with the complexities of the wounds and healthcare challenges our women veterans face, VHA's services must continue to stay ahead of the needs of our community.

IAVA leader and U.S. Army veteran Tracey Cooper-Harris recently reflected on her experiences with VA healthcare, citing overall satisfaction with the care she received. She, like so many veterans, had a variety of unique experiences and her knowledge of the VA system is a testament to why it is so important to continue to keep our ear to the ground and make certain VA receives feedback from our community regularly.

While the care is top-notch at smaller clinics, Tracey still continues to see issues at the larger clinics where male patients, on occasion, doubt the authenticity of her veteran status because she is female. VA is getting better but problems remain.

IAVA continues to engage our women veterans and rely on the experiences of those members who call into our New York City-based



Rapid Response Referral Program (RRRP) and share their healthcare experiences and look for ways to get help from our clinically licensed staff and veteran transition managers.

Our direct-service RRRP program is just one of many ways we engage our members in order to make sure that when we show up before this Committee, we have the on-the-ground perspective of the veterans we all want to serve.

At IAVA, our members know we have their back. In order for Congress, the VA, and the veterans community to continue to support them as best as possible, we need to listen to their voices and finally get accountability reform signed by the president this year.

Thank you for your time and attention, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Mrs. Welke, nor the organization she 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.