



Statement for the Record
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Subcommittee on Health
Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Statement for the Record
by
Lauren Augustine
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity and
Subcommittee on Health
hearing on
Draft Legislation to Improve Hiring Practices at the Department
of Veterans Affairs

March 16, 2016

Chairman Wenstrup, Chairman Benishek, Ranking Members Takano and Brownley, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 450,000 members and supporters, we would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share our views on the draft legislation to improve hiring practices at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

As all in the veteran community are well aware, the need for greater accountability at the VA is paramount to successfully restoring veterans' trust in the system. However, just as important is the need to employ and retain highly qualified, motivated professionals willing to support the VA's mission. The VA has asked for, and should receive, many of the provisions within this draft legislation, which are necessary changes to their current hiring practices to support such goals. IAVA is pleased to see many additional provisions within the draft legislation that aim to meet those same needs among other key changes to better the VA's hiring and retention process.



While the vast majority of VA employees serve veterans with outstanding care and professionalism, the few underperforming or negligent employees that discredit their service must be held accountable in a swift manner that brings justice to the system while also protecting whistleblowers and maintaining a culture professionals want to work within. IAVA fully supports the measure within the draft legislation to appoint Directors of Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) and Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMC) under title 38, which has been requested specifically by the VA, to ensure less bureaucracy and more accountability as it relates to disciplining wrongdoing. This measure will also provide the VA greater flexibility in offering competitive pay and compensation to attract and retain the most qualified candidates for such positions. We cannot expect VA Directors to perform at levels that meet or exceed their private-sector counterparts if we are not willing to compensate them fairly.

Additional contributions to greater accountability in the legislation require the VA to conduct an annual performance plan for all political appointees in a similar manner Senior Executive Service are evaluated. The evaluation would include measuring appointees' ability to recruit and retain qualified employees, engage and motivate employees, train employees and hold them accountable for any potential performance issues. The ability for all VA leaders, including political appointees, to successfully meet and exceed the requirements of such tasks will continue to be a key aspect to ensuring quality leaders exhibit the highest standards of professionalism.

In its efforts to institute better hiring practices, the VA must also become more acutely aware of the actual need and capabilities of its workforce in addition to instituting policies to support its existing workforce. IAVA supports the measures



within the draft legislation to provide the VA better insight into its hiring capabilities. Specifically, IAVA supports the requirement to measure and collect information on hiring effectiveness and to adjust the current requirements to identify the five occupations with the highest staffing shortages to include the five highest staffing shortages for both clinical and nonclinical occupations. Understanding what the staffing needs are coupled with a greater understanding of hiring effectiveness will help streamline the process for those looking to serve within the VA. Building on that is the need to ensure continued training and growth opportunities for existing VA employees. The promotional track for technical experts that eliminates a requirement to accept managerial positions created within the legislation will help retain those professionals looking to utilize their expertise without adding unwanted responsibilities. Leveraging the existing expertise and talent within the VA supports a greater continuity of institutional knowledge and professional satisfaction.

Providing professional development and training opportunities for VA employees are practices IAVA has frequently advocated for as a means to support the VA workforce. As such, IAVA strongly supports the one year private-sector fellowship for select Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) employees. Gaining best-in-practice knowledge, policies and procedures from the private sector can only help strengthen the capabilities of VA employees and their capacity to meet the VA's mission. Likewise, IAVA supports the provision to provide training for human resources professionals within the VA for recruiting and hiring Title 38 employees. Since Title 38 employees make up many of the occupations within the VHA, understanding the nuances of the hiring process for these employees will create a more efficient process.



The provisions within the draft legislation that consider adjustments to education benefits through the Yellow Ribbon program and modifications to veteran preference are both measures IAVA supports as a means to increase both the number of applicants seeking to serve at the VA and the number of veterans serving within the VA system. IAVA is particularly supportive of incentivizing veterans to seek education that will lead to becoming mental health care professionals within the VA. As our members continue to express a need for greater access to care and cultural understanding, IAVA recognizes the potential of such incentives will help meet that need.

At IAVA, we believe our members, and all veterans, deserve the very best our nation can offer when it comes to fulfilling the promises made to them upon entry into the military. To support that cause and the critical mission of the VA, IAVA fully supports equipping the VA with the necessary authority to provide best-in-class hiring practices.

As the Committee works to finalize this legislation, IAVA strongly recommends not paying for its provisions by cutting critical benefits that our nation's 23 million veterans and their families have come to rely upon. We look forward to reviewing the final language of the legislation, continuing to work together as partners, and finding veteran-centric solutions to the challenges facing the VA and the veteran community.



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**Biography of Lauren Augustine
Legislative Associate, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**

Lauren served in the US Army as an unmanned aircraft systems operator flying RQ-7Bs, better known as the Shadow. Lauren deployed with the Big Red One, 1st Infantry Division, to Taji, Iraq providing surveillance and reconnaissance for central Iraq and Baghdad. Lauren is currently working as a legislative associate for IAVA, where she advocates Congress to improve the lives of veterans and their families through legislation. Prior to joining the military, Lauren received a Bachelor's Degree in international studies and Russian language from Virginia Tech in 2009. In addition to her work with IAVA, she is a small business owner of CrossFit Unbowed in Woodbridge, Virginia.

Statement on Receipt of Grants or Contract Funds

Neither Mrs. Augustine, 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.