



IRAQ *and* AFGHANISTAN VETERANS *of* AMERICA

March 30, 2009

The Honorable James Tester
724 Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Tester:

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) is pleased to offer support for S. 658, the Rural Veterans Health Care Improvement Act. S. 658 will bring top quality health care to the veteran because access to effective health care for returning veterans reflects a moral obligation that should not be limited by a veteran's address.

According to the GAO, more than 25 percent of veterans enrolled in VA health care live over 60 minutes driving time from a VA hospital. This legislation would implement a multi-pronged approach to delivering quality health care to these veterans, by creating rural centers of excellence, transportation grants, demonstration projects and most importantly authorizing the VA to build local peer outreach and support services.

With nearly one third of all returning veterans suffering from hidden mental health injuries, S.658 will improve the lives of veterans by allowing fellow veterans to act as peer counselors who will be able to share common experiences and reassure those suffering from combat stress injuries that they are far from alone. S. 658 would also expand current counseling capacity by allowing the VA to contract with local community health centers.

We are proud to offer our assistance and we are grateful for this meaningful legislation. As this legislation moves forward please feel free to contact me at anytime, patrick@iava.org or (202) 544-7692.

Sincerely,

Patrick Campbell
Chief Legislative Counsel