

Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017

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Statement of
Patrick D. Murray, Associate Director
National Legislative Service
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Before the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives

With Respect To

Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017

WASHINGTON D.C.

Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present the VFW's thoughts on the pending GI Bill legislation.

Section 101

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street Office 816.756.3390
Kansas City, MO 64111 Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E. Office 202.543.2239
Washington, D.C. 20002 Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

The VFW supports this section which would allow for National Guardsmen and Reservists ordered to active duty for medical treatment to receive the same educational benefits as their active duty counterparts. There are service members who were injured during their military service and who are convalescing at military treatment facilities throughout the country, but are not accruing the same educational benefits as other service members currently on active duty. Their time on active duty should be considered no different than any others and this legislation will make that possible.

This bill will rectify the mistake made by the Department of Defense (DOD) in putting National Guardsmen and Reservists on 12301(h) orders which exempt them from benefits in order to save money. DOD should not have used this cost cutting measure because it is detrimental to our troops' morale and welfare. The VFW endorses any legislation like this that will ensure full benefits for our troops while they are away from their civilian lives on active duty.

Section 102

The VFW agrees with the intent of this section which would increase the rates of educational benefits provided to National Guardsmen and Reservists. Educating our veteran population is one of the VFW's highest priorities, and we are happy this committee values education as a priority as well.

Section 103

The VFW supports this section increasing the rate of educational benefits for recipients of the Purple Heart. For the past decade and a half, our country has been sending National Guardsmen and Reservists into harm's way at an unprecedented level, and some of them have been wounded in the line of duty. Nearly 3,000 of these Citizen Soldiers have bled for this country, but have not accrued enough active duty time to attain full GI Bill benefits.

The VFW thinks that service men and women who have bled for this country should be compensated for their injuries by granting them full education benefits. This is the least we as a country can do for those who put their bodies on the line for our freedoms.

Section 104

Veterans who lost entitlements while pursuing education through the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) should be allowed to have their benefits restored. Allowing those that lost the benefit the ability to recoup their eligibility and switch into chapter 33 is a straightforward, common sense solution to address this problem.

Section 105

The VFW would ask that more research be done on how many student veterans would be affected by this change and how much money would increase or decrease. There have been cases where school recruiters have sought out new students with the promise of making more money in their housing stipend based on zip code differences. Students should not choose their schools based on Basic Allowance for Housing rates; they should choose their schools based on the value of education they would receive. However, adjusting this rule could have some unintended consequences to veterans through no fault of their own. Making a change to the housing stipend with regard to the location of schools without doing the due diligence as to how many veterans this would affect is a hasty decision, and we would like to see additional information before we make a decision to support this portion of the legislation.

Section 106

The VFW supports this section which would change the structure of charging for the costs of the tests and certifications veterans apply for, instead of a months' worth of eligibility from their GI Bill. The GI Bill pays for books, labs and fees for student veterans attending college. This bill would include test fees in the GI Bill payment structure, and would provide a savings to the government and also allow student veterans to retain GI Bill eligibility, instead of having to use it for a test fee.

Section 107

The VFW strongly supports this section to protect student veterans who were negatively affected by school closures. Recently ITT Technical Institute and Westech College suddenly shuttered their doors after losing accreditation. This left thousands of student veterans out of school mid-semester, with no plan for what to do the rest of the term. They had lost

weeks or months of GI Bill benefits that were wasted at failed institutions. Even worse, they lost the monthly housing stipend many relied upon for their living situation. This legislation allows these affected student veterans to recoup their lost months of GI Bill eligibility.

While we support this initiative, we do not feel it goes far enough. We think student veterans should be able to recoup the months of eligibility wasted at the closed institutions just like traditional students can with Pell Grants. Student veterans who attended schools like ITT have now lost those months of GI Bill eligibility and they have no credits to show for it. The VFW has heard from student veterans from the closed schools, and they are now struggling to complete their degrees without their previous credits. GI Bill eligibility should be allowed to be recouped like Chapter Four Pell Grants can be by traditional students. Student veterans deserve the same equity as every other student affected by school closures.

Additionally, these student veterans now have no monthly income from their GI Bill benefits. The VFW strongly supports extending the Basic Allowance for Housing payments for a maximum of four months or until the end of the term, whichever is earliest. Our team at the VFW immediately reached out to the student veterans affected by each of the school closures and offered them a stopgap measure through our Unmet Needs Program. We provided the student veterans with some financial stability to make it through the next month or so while they got settled after this major life upheaval. This was, however, only a band-aid for the real problem. These student veterans need protection for the future so issues like this do not affect them as badly as these past closures have.

Section 108

The VFW supports this section that offers additional financial assistance for the children of our fallen heroes. The Fry Scholarship gives 100 percent GI Bill benefits to the children and spouses of fallen service members who gave their lives serving our country. While this is a great benefit for the families of the fallen, there are some cases where financially it is not enough.

This legislation would bridge the gap, so the children or spouses who are eligible for the Fry Scholarship would not have to pay any out-of-pocket costs to achieve their educational goals. Allowing recipients of the Fry Scholarship eligibility to the Yellow Ribbon Program is just a very small measure that does not even begin to repay the sacrifice their service member made for our country.

Section 109

The VFW agrees with the intent of this section which would allow for the transfer of benefits to a surviving child after the loss of another child. The loss of a child is such an unimaginable tragedy that allowing the transference of benefits to a surviving child is only a small measure of relief that we feel is completely reasonable. If a veteran has already transferred their benefits to one child, it should be in their right to move the benefit to another child in cases of death.

Section 110

The VFW strongly supports this provision to grant additional months of GI Bill eligibility for student veterans pursuing degrees in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). Our nation is making a push to encourage more students to pursue STEM degrees in order to be competitive and outpace other nations around the world. Student veterans should be at the forefront of this initiative. In order to make this a possibility, there needs to be some additional eligibility granted for those pursuing these degrees, because STEM programs often take longer than the traditional four years to complete a bachelor's degree. The VFW wants to see student veterans succeed at the highest levels, and extending school eligibility in this case may be necessary to complete these highly important degrees.

Section 111

The current GI Bill has a 15-year, use-it-or-lose-it time limit on the benefit. This arbitrary cap negatively impacts those veterans looking to use their educational benefit later on in life. Veterans should not be punished for successfully transitioning shortly after their service, and choosing to go back to school afterwards. This legislation would eliminate the 15-year limit and allow the GI Bill to be used whenever a veteran chooses, making this truly a forever GI Bill.

Section 112

The VFW supports prorating the monthly eligibility for those service members called up on

involuntary orders. National Guardsmen and Reservists should not lose an entire month of eligibility if they are not using the entire month due to activation orders. These service members should have that month prorated so they can still retain some of the eligibility.

Section 113

The VFW strongly supports the improvement of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) information technology (IT) systems. Time and time again, VA has failed to accurately account for millions of dollars of wrongful payments due to outdated IT systems. Any efforts to enhance the IT systems and bring them into the 21st century is strongly supported by the VFW. We would like to see this fixed as soon as possible in order to save taxpayer money and alleviate repayment burdens from veterans attending school.

Section 114

The VFW supports this section as it would provide new job opportunities in expanding fields for the future. Creating innovative ways that service members and veterans can achieve training and proficiency in new technology-related fields is essential for the future of our country and those who served it. The VFW would like to see this program move forward, and we highly endorse the input from the State Approving Agencies (SAA), which are instrumental in ensuring the value and validity of programs like this. The SAA is tasked with overseeing programs such as this and we would like their agencies' approval before moving completely forward with this as a permanent program.

Section 201

This section is a simple extension of VA's authority to offer work-study allowances for student veterans. The VFW has long supported VA's work-study program, and we would proudly support this initiative to extend the program to 2027. Work-study is a valuable tool for student veterans to support valuable initiatives in and around their school community and earn extra income while taking classes.

While the VFW supports this addition, we would like to see the end date for this program extended indefinitely. There should not be any time in the foreseeable future where there are not veterans attending schools after their enlistments, so we do not see any time where

work-study would not be an added value to student veterans.

Section 202

The VFW has no position on this section.

Section 203

The VFW supports increasing the payments made to survivors and dependents for educational benefits. As the years have gone on, there has not been a significant increase in the amount of money survivors and dependents receive as their educational benefit. It is beyond time to make an increase in payments so as to keep pace with the rising cost of present day college tuitions.

Section 301

The VFW supports increasing the funding allocated to the State Approving Agencies. These agencies are the first line in ensuring schools are properly accredited and providing a high standard of education for student veterans. There have been thousands of student veterans left out on their own after their schools closed, sometimes with little or no notice. The SAA's role is to make sure that institutions are accredited and providing the services they claim to provide. For that reason, the VFW endorses additional funding in the hopes that school closures like ITT do not affect veterans in the future. While this section proposes an increase of three million dollars, the VFW would like to see the added funding be seven million dollars in order to strengthen the SAAs even more.

Section 302

The VFW supports the development and authorization of an independent study program that would further advance a veteran's education. We realize that not every class has to be taken in a traditional brick and mortar institution, and innovative programs like this would provide a new opportunity for veterans to succeed.

Section 303

The VFW supports authorizing veterans using GI Bill benefits to enroll in classes before the standard enrollment date. Veterans have a finite time to use their education benefits, and being locked out of required classes due to capacity issues is a real problem for student veterans. An easy way to avoid this is to allow veterans using the GI Bill to enroll earlier than the general student body, so as to make sure they do not get denied entrance into their required classes. Providing study results that show this as a viable option would be an excellent path forward for veterans, and is something the VFW would gladly support.

Section 304

The VFW supports the limitation of reporting fees for general school uses. At the beginning of each term, a School Certifying Official (SCO) reports the enrollment of a GI Bill user to VA. This enrollment signifies the usage of educational benefits for the individual. After this is complete, the school receives a \$12 payment from VA for certifying the enrollment. Currently, there is no limitation on where that money is disbursed within the school's system. This legislation would ensure that schools are not using that reporting fee for their own general use. The VFW supports the plan to limit the usage of those fees for veteran services only. This would add to the amount of money available for veteran programs within those institutions.

Section 305

The VFW supports mandatory training for SCOs. In 2014 alone, there were \$262 million dollars in erroneous Post-9/11 GI Bill payments to students and most times the students, not the schools, are the ones burdened with repaying the money. Making sure the SCO's are properly trained is one step in avoiding overpayments, and the VFW supports this action. While this legislation does not specifically address the source of funding for this training, the VFW thinks the schools themselves should be responsible for the cost of the training

Section 306

The VFW supports extending the authority of the Advisory Committee on Education until 2022. This is a valuable asset the VA Secretary can use to gather information and advice on

how student veterans are using their education benefits, and the committee can advise on any changes or improvements that may be needed. The VFW supports this committee and would like to see its authority extended indefinitely. Student veterans will always be going to school, so we think this committee should always be present.

Section 307

The VFW supports adding vocational and educational counselors to campuses to further expand the resources available to student veterans. Student veterans sometimes face an uphill fight to transition from service to school. Having an additional knowledge base the veterans can lean on is an incredible tool that will only help those veterans succeed in their goals.

Section 308

The VFW supports giving SCOs access to student veteran's records in order to appropriately counsel the students on their entitlements. As student veterans progress through their educational journey, there are often times they seek help or have questions. Student or academic advisors do not have the ability look up the student veterans' VA eligibility, so allowing the SCO's to do so is a great help. The SCO's should already have familiarity with student veterans and their needs, so installing the ability to view their records should be a seamless addition.

While the VFW supports improving the access to veterans' academic eligibility, we do not see why there should be a cost associated with this. Allowing SCO's to log into VA's system to check on eligibility should not cost millions of dollars. We agree with the process, but not the cost.

Section 309

The VFW supports allowing leniency in school start dates in terms of processing and payments. Schools across the country are allowed to begin their school years at varying times. A school that is allowed to start the term a day or so later than other schools should not reflect upon the student veteran attending that school. Allowing VA to treat start dates the same across different schools will help the students and VA itself in simplifying this

process.

Section 401

The VFW strongly supports this legislation that would correct the oversight of the Department of Defense by cutting service members' benefits while on active duty orders. National Guardsmen and Reservists were placed on involuntary activation orders that did not allow them to accrue benefits through time and service like their active duty counterparts. While stationed abroad and away from their homes and families, these troops were denied the ability to gain educational credit for use after demobilization.

12304(b) orders need to be amended to keep the activation authority, but reinstitute the benefits that were removed. Thousands of National Guardsmen and Reservists have been involuntarily activated under these orders and have not received benefits equal to their active duty counterparts. More and more, DOD is using our nation's reserve component to fight our decade and a half war against terror, and for these men and women to come home without equal benefits is something that must change.

Section 501

The VFW supports the repeal of Subsection (b) of section 604 of the *Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015*. This change does not cut benefits and covers the cost of these great additions to the GI Bill.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to take any questions you or the members of the committee may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2017, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.