

Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program

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Statement of

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National Legislative Service
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

With Respect To

Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on this important benefit.

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service (VR&E) provides critical counseling and other adjunct services necessary to enable service-disabled veterans to overcome barriers as they prepare for, find, and maintain gainful employment. VR&E offers services on five tracks: re-employment, rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through long-term services, and independent living.

The VFW views VR&E as a critical tool in promoting success for our veterans. It is at the

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forefront in ensuring veterans can remain in the workforce and stay employed in meaningful careers. Once a veteran receives a disability rating, and cannot continue along their original path in the workforce, they must choose a different route for their career. This is where VR&E is critical because it helps veterans remain employed by providing training and education for an alternative career.

A vital part of the VR&E program is the counselors who assist veterans with their claims. The counselors are the key component in assisting veterans with their rehabilitation plan for VR&E. However, for VR&E counselors, training and standardization is the largest area of improvement needed for this program.

Far too often VFW service officers encounter veterans who are eligible to receive VR&E benefits but were originally denied by the VR&E counselors. The subjectivity of approving eligibility leads to veterans being denied the benefit, when in fact they should have been approved immediately. There needs to be a more standardized way to approve the eligibility of veterans, and further training of counselors, so recipients do not have to fight for a benefit they deserve.

Additionally, while the counselors should guide their clients towards making sound financial decisions with their VR&E benefit, we do not feel the counselors should deny claims based entirely on if there are cheaper alternatives. The counselors should work with their clients to prevent waste and abuse of the benefit, but veterans should be allowed to have some agency in where they receive their training. VR&E is not a blank check, but counselors should factor in the entirety of the training received and not simply the overall cost. The VFW was recently informed of a veteran facing difficulty with VR&E claims processing. The counselor is pressuring the student to attend a public non-profit university because it is cheaper than the private non-profit university the veteran would like to attend. Approving or denying claims based on cost does not serve the best interest of veterans who use the VR&E program.

VA budget documents state that the VR&E program will meet and sustain the congressionally mandated goal of 1:125 counselor-to client ratio. However, the latest data in the VA budget document also shows that from 2016 to 2018, the number of VR&E participants fell from 173,606 to 164,355 -- more than a five percent decrease. During that same period, VR&E's caseload also dropped from 137,097 to 125,513 -- an 8.4 percent decline. It would appear that VR&E is able to meet the 1:125 goal by serving fewer veterans. We understand that there have been major changes and upgrades to the entire program, which would enable veterans who were unable to use or were unaware of their VR&E benefits. VA must consider whether more staff is needed to meet such increased demand.

The VFW supports adding more VR&E counselors on military installations, and also on college campuses. The Veteran Success on Campus (VSOC) program is an incredibly

valuable resource for those utilizing the VR&E benefit at colleges. Currently, there are VR&E counselors on 71 military installations and 104 VSOC representatives on campuses. Given how positive the feedback is from both universities and students, the VFW urges Congress and VA to expand this program to as many locations as possible.

While VR&E is an employment program, it is commonly used for training on college campuses. The processing of VR&E claims to universities is where we hear about a lot of VR&E problems. The processing of chapter 31 claims takes months to go through the system leaving some universities without payment for multiple semesters. In some cases, students are not allowed further enrollment until payments are made, and in others, students are being counseled to voluntarily not enroll until the delayed payments are made. The delays in processing VR&E payments are negatively affecting users of this program. This problem must be rectified immediately.

Another obstacle in utilizing the VR&E program is the 12-year delimiting date for eligibility. Counselors have the ability to waive that requirement, so it is not as much a barrier for acceptance, as it is a barrier for veterans seeking to apply. A common complaint we hear from our members when we recommend VR&E is that they do not think they are eligible because they are past the 12-year window. We urge Congress to pass H.R. 444, which would eliminate the 12-year delimiting date for eligibility and provide veterans vocational rehabilitation for life. Service-disabled veterans must be authorized to receive access to VR&E services at any point during their employable lives when service-connected disabilities interfere with their employment, but also as the economy changes to learn new employable skills.

Another improvement the VFW would like to see is expanded tracking of veterans who complete their VR&E goals. Attaining employment after completing the program is important, but sustaining that employment is equally important. Tracking the long term success of veterans can help to build improvements into the program to better help current and future VR&E users. We suggest adding to the VR&E program a follow on service that checks in with VR&E participants at certain dates once they have completed the program, to ensure the program was ultimately successful.

Finally, the VFW calls upon VA to better explain VR&E and its uses before service members separate during the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). A consistent complaint from our members is they were unaware of the VR&E program, and who is eligible for it. A lot of disinformation is spread by word of mouth, and there is a lot of confusion about eligibility, and exactly how the program can be used. Some veterans are approved to use VR&E to attain advanced degrees, and others are denied the same opportunity. The flexibility of VR&E is one of the best parts of the program, but not having standardized usages leads to a lot of confusion and resentment towards VA. A more robust discussion of the program within TAP classes would help mitigate some of the confusion surrounding VR&E and may guide more veterans towards using it if there is better information presented earlier.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and the Ranking Member for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before this subcommittee. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.