

Success After Service: Improving Veterans' Employment, Education, and Home Loan Opportunities

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Statement of
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National Legislative Service
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

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With Respect To

“Success After Service: Improving Veterans' Employment, Education, and Home Loan Opportunities”

Washington, D.C.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and 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 provide our remarks on this important topic.

Digital GI Bill Implementation

The Digital GI Bill upgrade will accommodate many requests Congress and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) have been making for years. After the IT overhaul, the Department of

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Veterans Affairs Education Services (VAES) will have a cleaner platform to replace VA-ONCE for School Certifying Officials, State Approving Agencies, and VA officials, so they can all have the ability to view one screen when interacting with each other instead of different individual platforms.

It will make possible regular upgrades to the GI Bill Comparison Tool instead of housing years-old information that is difficult to corroborate or edit once in place. It will also allow for platforms to be introduced that can accommodate the data-sharing agreements between VA and other agencies. It could provide a digital Certificate of Eligibility for the GI Bill using similar automated technology as the VA Home Loan. Finally, it would be able to track GI Bill users so easier notifications can be made to all benefits users to deliver timely information regarding updates or changes.

A project like the Digital GI Bill upgrade will set VAES up for success in future years. It will also head off any delays by ensuring veterans receive their benefits to utilize some truly life-changing programs offered by VA. Congress must provide robust oversight of this upgrade in order to ensure this latest IT improvement is correctly implemented, and mistakes of the past are not repeated. We appreciate the transparency surrounding this specific VA IT upgrade and ask for continued monitoring and updates in order to keep the success of this project on track.

The Digital GI Bill upgrade is an example of a long-overdue IT change for a critical program office within VA. Far too many times stakeholders such as Congress and VSOs have collectively overlooked IT resources for new programs and needed changes within VAES. For example, a change to VA Work-Study was recently passed into law adjusting the payment schedule for work-study recipients. Unfortunately, VA did not have a platform to calculate and deliver those new payments, and no additional IT funding was provided to support the program's changes. Unfunded mandates such as the work-study change will lead to VAES trying to create yet another workaround, and to use already overworked and outdated systems to perform a new task for which they were not intended.

The VFW believes that every new proposal going forward must include IT resources to accomplish program goals. Once the Digital GI Bill upgrades are complete and functioning, we must not continue to saddle VAES IT systems with unfunded mandates. As new improvements and upgrades happen in the future, they must be accompanied by corresponding IT resources to update the new system. Workarounds and patchwork solutions should be a practice of the past, and not something we continue once the new

systems are functional. Minor delays can be avoided by ensuring proper IT funding is added to all new proposals.

COVID-19 Student Veteran Protections

With a looming expiration date of December 21, 2021, for student veteran COVID-19 protection measures, there is an urgent need to establish measures that will extend these protections as the circumstances that originally required them remain. For the thousands of student veterans who originally chose to use their earned GI Bill benefits at resident programs and have been involuntarily converted to online environments due to the dangers of the ongoing pandemic, the expiration of these protections proves dire. If these protections are not extended, it will put these student veterans at a crossroads where they may not be able to persist in their education programs to graduation. If these student veterans are not able to receive the Monthly Housing Allowance or work-study stipends they originally counted on when beginning their educational path, they will be forced to adjust their budgets in short order, likely facing undue financial hardships and unable to pursue their education to eventually achieve their employment goals. As these protections continue to be needed for these student veterans, we urge Congress to quickly pass legislation that extends all student veteran COVID-19 protections that were deemed necessary at the start of the pandemic and still persist today.

Employment Programs

VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program has successfully helped many service-connected veterans pursue employment and education opportunities. However, the VFW remains concerned about the high caseloads VR&E counselors maintain as it limits the amount of time they can spend with veteran clients assessing their current status, needs, goals, and what constitutes meaningful employment for each veteran. Congress should study changing the current program eligibility standards to determine if doing so would streamline the process by expanding eligibility to all veterans who have been awarded service-connected disability ratings, regardless of the degree of disability. Many veterans also continue to experience high turnover rates of their VR&E counselors, which can affect long-term success in the program.

As a result, the VFW recommends that the VA Office of Inspector General conducts an assessment of the VR&E program staff to determine the average amount of time each counselor spends working with a veteran, the rate of staff turnover, the length of time between counselor engagement, and the length of employment for veterans placed into positions through VR&E. This would ensure that there are sufficient staffing levels and a low rate of attrition, which is vital to the success of this critical program. By pursuing education, training, or civic engagement, veterans will be better equipped to re-enter the workforce when the COVID-19 pandemic subsides or when they have work-from-home employment opportunities.

The VR&E program offices have recently undergone an overhaul of their outdated processing methods. Digitizing the old paper-based systems should benefit the entire program. The VFW would like to see how these changes have affected the operations of the program office, and the impact on individual counselors. We believe enough time has passed since the upgrades began to see how the changes have progressed and what additional changes may be necessary.

The early successes of programs like Veterans Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) show that an investment in veteran economic outcomes is incredibly beneficial. The payment structure of the program incentivizes completion of the program and gainful employment after completion. The model for VET TEC requires 25 percent of the funds to be held until the veteran completes the program, and the final 25 percent to be held until the veteran begins work. This structure helps promote success of the program and requires the training institution to ensure full completion of the program. The VFW asks for full funding of the VET TEC program up to 125 million dollars to help get as many veterans gainfully employed as quickly as possible.

The Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) has begun taking initial applicants. We are encouraged to see thousands of veterans applying to seek retraining in high demand jobs. We understand the initial denial rates are mostly because applicants still have other VA education or employment benefits available. We have asked VA, and it responded positively that the denial letters stating veterans still have benefits remaining is explained in clear and understandable language, and that these letters direct veterans toward employment programs such as VET TEC or VR&E.

Transition

The VFW believes a proper and well-rounded transition from the military is one of the most important things our service members need in order to ease back into our society with minimal hardships. To that extent, the VFW places great emphasis on ensuring transitioning service members receive the best counseling and mentorship before they leave military service. Veterans who make smooth transitions by properly utilizing the tools and programs available will face less uncertainty regarding their moves from military to civilian life.

Today's military has faced almost two decades of continuous war, and this extended time of conflict has shaped the experiences of all men and women who have worn the uniform defending our country. This experience of heightened conflict makes transitioning to the civilian world that much more important. Only a small percentage of Americans serve their country in the armed forces, so transitioning back to the civilian world after military service can bring its own set of trials and tribulations.

Transitioning service members face many hardships including unemployment, financial difficulty, lack of purpose, separation anxiety, and many unknowns. There have been programs set in place to ease the hardship of this change. The VFW believes these programs are paramount. The VFW views transition programs such as the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Soldier For Life as key stepping stones. The information provided to service members on VA benefits, financial management, higher education, and entrepreneurship is invaluable.

The VFW's accredited service officers have been a resource for transitioning service members since 2001 and continue to provide assistance to these men and women during this difficult time of change. We provide pre-discharge claims representation at 24 bases around the country, and are available for transitioning service members at the same time they receive their training in TAP. While the primary role for the VFW staff in the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program is to help service members navigate their VA disability claims, they are also able to assist with many other available benefits and opportunities. This past year, between individual meetings and classroom briefings, the VFW met with over 14,000 service members.

Each person our BDD representatives work with is asked to complete a survey detailing their experiences throughout the transition process. From March 2020 - February 2021, the VFW collected 1,100 surveys from the service members, families, and veterans we served at our BDD sites. Some of the data were expected considering the unprecedented changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but other numbers suggested there is still a lot of improvement needed within TAP regardless of the pandemic situation.

While there was a slight improvement regarding the timely attendance of TAP classes, 40 percent of service members were still not attending at least six months prior to separation. Additionally, we were surprised to see almost 60 percent reported not participating in any of the three specific tracks that were made mandatory as part of the formal curriculum last year. Changes over the past years have been signed into law in order to improve the transition of service members. The VFW is greatly concerned some of these new mandates are not being adhered to.

Our BDD representatives offer guidance and information for many different transition opportunities that may not be covered in the TAP classes. Our representatives are trained in education, employment, and financial management opportunities, and can be additional resources. Service members who utilize additional resources such as BDD representatives are likely to face fewer unknown hurdles during transition.

Covid-Specific TAP Issues

In March 2020, the United States was unprepared for the new and fast-spreading COVID-19 virus. In response, we witnessed TAP offices hurriedly shutting down and furloughing VA benefits advisors who were contract employees. This left transitioning service members scrambling to adapt to a national crisis and changing environment in the midst of their exit from the military. While our great military services did a fantastic job adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic by maintaining national defense and the well-being of the service members, the garrison support's response was sorely inadequate. They chose to just shut down.

From what we witnessed, there was no well-vetted plan in place for this situation. The TAP program responded by initially directing service members to the Joint Knowledge Online (JKO) portal for completion of TAP training. JKO requires a Common Access Card, which family members do not have. Later it was moved to the computer-based training classes on a public site, <https://tapevents.org/courses>. This change to the .org site allowed family members to access the computer-based training courses as the pandemic shutdown continued. The VFW believes that moving forward, any online TAP resources should always be hosted on a public-facing website so service members, families, and veterans can access this vital information at all times.

The information we received from service members during this critical time of transition was that once they were finally directed to the computer-based training, they found it was training just to check the box. The value was greatly diminished as it is not the same as a virtual live presentation. There is no interaction in computer-based training as it is all automated, whereas a virtual live presentation allows for interaction and questions. The VFW believes any online TAP training moving forward should always be a virtual live format.

Computer-based training courses do not facilitate an enriched learning environment. This is extremely important during the critical transition time and can impact the success of service members integrating into civilian society. Imagine your transition place of duty is in front of a computer screen for 330 minutes of non-interactive computer training for “Employment Fundamentals of Career Transition,” 240 minutes of eye-glazing screen activity in “VA Benefits and Services” or 630 minutes of mind-numbing “Employment Track: Employment Workshop.”

By contrast, the VFW pre-discharge claims representatives transitioned into the COVID-19 pandemic without missing a beat. Even though our representatives were forced into a telework environment, they continued to assist transitioning service members with their VA pre-discharge claims. Our representatives had the necessary equipment prior to the pandemic and were already well-versed in the electronic submission of claims. The DoD Secure Access File Exchange portal was operational for secure transfer of documents between service members and VFW claims representatives. During the first full month of the pandemic, April 2020, our pre-discharge claims representatives submitted nearly 800 claims. The next month was about the same. Even though our physical locations were closed, we never shut down our service to our warriors.

It was a significant issue for us that our host and hub of interaction with service members was not operational. TAP offices were closed and many service members believed our services were closed as well, which was far from reality. Where we were allowed, we posted signs with our contact information on the doors of TAP offices and buildings that were shutting down. Many service members who called or emailed us expressed frustration and anxiety that TAP was closed, VA benefits advisors were gone, and they did not know who could assist with their VA claims. They were relieved to find out we were fully functional with no issues assisting and submitting claims to VA.

Initially, two of our offices engaged with the bases they support to offer assistance for TSMs. Joint Base Andrews, Maryland, Military and Family Support Center was one of the first to come online with live virtual TAP classes. Naval Support Activity Annapolis Fleet and Family Support Center followed shortly after Joint Base Andrews. They quickly integrated the VFW into their virtual TAP classes to discuss the VA claims process because the VA benefits advisors were noticeably absent.

Over the past year we have officially been integrated into the TAP curriculum at other locations to provide VA benefits briefings because the instructors were no longer there. Our BDD representatives provided full time instruction of VA benefits at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada; Joint Base Myer, Virginia; Joint Base Andrews, Maryland; Naval Support Activity Washington, D.C. (Navy Yard); Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, D.C.; Naval Support Activity Annapolis, Maryland; Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; General Officer TAP classes (Pentagon) Washington, D.C.

We were also asked to provide supplemental instruction at other bases around the country. At Camp Pendleton, California, VFW representatives briefed during the new Spouse Transition and Readiness Seminar. In San Diego, representatives briefed at the Veterans Transition Service. At Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, representatives briefed the Navy Reserve quarterly. At Norfolk, Virginia, VFW representatives provided benefits briefings along with the USO Pathfinders Program.

Eventually we had other TAP offices bring back some workforce to provide virtual TAP assistance and several contacted our representatives to brief in their classes and take

questions. The General Officer TAP programs also reached out to us to brief. We heard several comments about how service members were directed to the non-interactive, computer-based training for VA benefits, but there was too much information and no way to follow up with questions. We provided live interaction that was, and is, necessary.

We also have had service members from across the country and around the world reach out to us to request assistance with their VA claims and help understanding the process because their local offices were either shut down or did not have the resources to assist. We have assisted service members in Germany, Belgium, Italy, Korea, and around the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. We may have been forced to temporarily close our physical doors at TAP sites, but we have never shut down our operation.

Now we are at a crossroads for the TAP program with several of the offices still closed. As we emerge from this pandemic, TSMs hope to experience a robust assistance program. We believe it is extremely important for TAP offices to integrate accredited veteran service officers into their operations, not as a third-party entity but as an integral part of the team. TAP offices need to welcome and embrace the partnership and knowledge our service officers bring to their teams. We are an additional and very important resource and partner. The best option is to have an accredited representative in the TAP office on location at the installation.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a lot of uncertainties, and many places around the country were not prepared for the scope of this pandemic. The transition offices were caught unprepared just like many others. However, what we witnessed was the ability and inability of certain elements within this process to pivot and adapt to new circumstances. We must use these experiences to learn and grow in order not to repeat some of the failures of certain elements within TAP. When the next iteration is developed, we urge that flexibility and adaptability be built into TAP in order to continue to provide these vital briefings no matter what the next hurdle might be.

Implementation Issues

In January of this year, the *Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care*

and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 was signed into law. This package contained many provisions for which the VFW is grateful. The elimination of the delimiting date for VR&E, the remaining provisions of the Chief Bill Mulder Act, along with the Deborah Sampson Act provisions, and the many upgrades to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program that will benefit countless veterans for years to come.

One provision for which the VFW advocated for years was the reinstatement of the Off Base Transition Training program. We are excited to see this program reinstituted with proper attention. Receiving the training and resources for a proper transition is vital for veterans during their TAP classes, and also in the years following separation. We are hopeful this program will be given the proper resources and attention it needs in order to succeed.

Another issue we have heard regarding the implementation of this package was the date these changes were required. The Forever GI Bill required its changes to be made on August 1, and many provisions within the Isakson-Roe bill also had implementation dates of August 1. The fall semester is the busiest time for enrolling students at colleges, so combining the increased workload with the changes required for these new laws made many of these changes more difficult. We ask that future education proposals take into consideration the increased workload during the fall semester and adjust the implementation dates accordingly, so as not to overload school officials trying to perform multiple tasks simultaneously.

Fourth Administration

Finally, the VFW supports establishing within VA the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. VA is comprised of three administrations—the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). VBA is in charge of not only compensation and pension, but also the GI Bill, vocational rehabilitation, housing and business loans, and the broadly defined transition assistance program, which is shared with the Departments of Labor, Defense, and Homeland Security.

The VFW believes our nation's focus on the economic opportunities of our veterans must be permanent. In reality, not all veterans seek VA health care when they are discharged, they do not need assistance from the NCA, and they do not all seek disability compensation. However, the vast majority are looking for gainful employment and/or education. Congress should recognize the value of these programs by separating them into their own administration focused solely on their utilization and growth.

The VFW has long proposed that Congress creates a fourth administration under VA with its own undersecretary whose sole responsibility is the economic opportunity programs. This change would permit the new Secretary of Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration to refocus resources, provide a champion for these programs, and create that central point of contact for VSOs and Congress. This would ensure that GI Bill, VR&E, Home Loan, and other Economic Opportunity centered benefits receive the attention they deserve.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the committee members may have.