

# Statement for the Record

*of*



*Submitted by*

**Kristofer Goldsmith**  
**Assistant Director for Policy and Government Affairs**

*for the*

**House Veterans' Affairs Committee**

*Regarding*

**H.R. 3218, the "Harry W. Colmery  
Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017"**

**July 17, 2017**

Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and other distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, on behalf of our National President John Rowan, our Board of Directors, and our membership, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) thanks you for the opportunity to present our views for the record concerning the legislation to be discussed at today's hearing.

Today the committee will discuss a bill meant to modernize and improve the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and hopefully come to agreement on the universal idea that our country should not leave behind any veteran deserving the support of our nation. It is the founding principle of VVA that *Never Again Will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another*, which is why our members are so passionate about improving and protecting earned veterans' benefits that they will never use themselves. This founding principle has guided us to our three top priorities regarding the GI Bill, which we urge the committee to support as you work to improve this important transition benefit:

- 1. Protect eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill for all veterans with administratively rendered other than dishonorable discharges, as this benefit has been stolen from thousands of veterans who were denied eligibility without the due process rights of court martial;**
- 2. Eliminate the arbitrary 15-year limit on usage of the GI Bill benefit, which punishes those veterans who struggle in their transition from service, and those who transition well then face unemployment or underemployment; and**
- 3. Remove era-specific naming of educational programs so that the GI Bill is not destined to create disparities between current and future generations of veterans.**

**VVA GI Bill Priority 1: Protecting GI Bill Eligibility** — VVA urges congress to return the GI Bill to the spirit of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more popularly known as the "GI Bill of Rights," which protected the rights and benefits of *all* returning veterans. Sadly, in recent decades, more and more veterans have been allowed to fall through the cracks.

According to 38 U.S. Code § 101 (2):

The term "veteran" is defined as an individual who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.

Why, then, does this our country deny veterans with administrative discharges, who were never

afforded the due process rights of courts martial, to be denied access to veterans benefits?

A GAO study, *Actions Needed to Ensure Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury Are Considered in Misconduct Separations* (GAO-17-260: Published: May 16, 2017) revealed that 57,141 veterans, representing 62 percent of veterans separated for misconduct between 2011 and 2015, had before separation been diagnosed with a mental health condition such as PTSD or TBI. According to the GAO report, nearly 15 percent of all of the soldiers who left the Army in 2011 did so with no GI Bill eligibility. Each of these veterans not only carries the stigma of having received a “bad-paper” discharge, but nearly all are prevented from utilizing the most important transition benefit, the GI Bill. Worse yet, 13,283 of those veterans received Other-than-Honorable discharges, and won’t have access to nearly any basic VA service until some reach the point of suicidality. This is a national tragedy that must immediately be addressed by this Congress.

**VVA GI Bill Priority 2: Elimination of the arbitrary 15-year limit on eligibility** — We thank the committee for including this top VVA priority in H.R. 3218, and will discuss this below.

**VVA GI Bill Priority 3: Era-specific naming** — We will address this issue in the next section.

**H.R. 3218, the “Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017”**

### ***Section 1. Short Title***

**This section cites the short title of HR 3218, bill as the “Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017.”**

The name of this bill is righteous in that it memorializes Harry W Colmery, the American Legion National Commander credited with authoring the original GI Bill. VVA seeks a return to the spirit of Colmery’s 1944 “GI Bill of Rights,” which both empowered and protected veterans as they transitioned from military service.

VVA strongly supports efforts to rebrand the GI Bill so that it is not, in the minds of Americans, “a wartime benefit,” and that it is instead an essential component of service in the United States military. After all, the United States has not officially declared war since 1941, when it declared war against Japan as a response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Technically speaking, the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Syria are “extended conflicts.” In these times there are no front lines, terrorists can strike at any time and any place, and as a result, today and tomorrow’s Active Duty, Reservist and National Guard troops and veterans are done a disservice

when the name of the GI Bill implies it is for specific engagements. This erroneous perception is part of the reason why there are already loopholes in the GI Bill that makes modernization efforts increasingly necessary. VVA urges the committee to take preventive measures against the opening of future loopholes by correcting the GI Bill in name and function, so that it is a benefit for service for all veterans who have chosen to enlist in the military, knowing full well the unpredictable nature of world events, emergencies and conflicts.

Congress should strike from Title 38 the phrase “Post-9/11” from GI Bill educational benefits wherever possible. The Department of Veterans Affairs should be instructed to remove “Post-9/11” and other era-specific branding from regulation, websites and literature regarding educational benefits in order to preserve the GI Bill for future generations of veterans.

***Section 101. Consideration of Certain Time Spent Receiving Medical Care from Secretary of Defense as Active Duty for Purposes of Eligibility for Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.***

**This section would add time spent on active duty under orders authorized by section 12301(h) of title 10, U.S.C., as qualifying time for the Post-9/11 GI Bill. These particular orders are used when a National Guard member or Reservist is receiving medical care or is recovering from injuries incurred while on active duty.**

Over the last decade, we have met scores of Reservists who have been held on active orders while they heal and wait for the med-board process to proceed apace, often separated from their families for months if not years at a time. For these troops held on active duty orders, it is eminently unfair that they are not earning eligibility for GI Bill benefits while those on active duty living in the same barracks, and assigned to the same unit, are able to do so.

VVA also strongly supports this provision and looks forward to seeing these National Guard and Reserve veterans get the benefits warranted by their service.

**Section 102. Consolidation of Eligibility Tiers under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.**

**This section would authorize additional GI Bill funding for members of the National Guard and Reserve. This section would increase the amount of money/eligibility that individuals receive who serve at least 90 days but less than six months, on active duty – it would increase from 40 percent to 50 percent benefit payable. It would also increase the amount of money/eligibility that individuals receive who serve at least six months but less than 12**

**months – it would increase from 50 percent to 60 percent benefit payable. For a student attending a private school, this would result in approximately \$2,300 more a year in tuition than they are receiving now and would receive more dollars for their housing allowance.**

VVA supports this provision.

***Section 103. Educational Assistance Under Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program for Members of the Armed Forces Awarded the Purple Heart.***

**This section would extend full eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill to any Purple Heart recipient since September 11, 2001.**

This provision closes an unintended loophole which denies full eligibility for the GI Bill for veterans who have bled for their country yet have not met the 36-month active duty requirement.

VVA strongly supports this provision, but urges Congress to consider the disparity that remains for those who served, experienced invisible wounds without the recognition of a Purple Heart, and then were made ineligible for the GI Bill due to unfair administrative discharges.

It is abundantly clear that the military is unfairly dismissing disabled veterans with less-than-honorable discharges in a manner that cripples their ability to recover. The Government Accountability Office “found that servicemembers diagnosed with PTSD, TBI, or certain other conditions can receive an ‘other than honorable’ discharge—making them potentially ineligible for VA health benefits.” While the focus of GAO-17-260 was the nexus of PTSD and related conditions resulting in a discharge denying veterans the health care they both need and deserve, it revealed that an outrageous number of recent veterans who suffered service-connected disabilities have also been denied access to the GI Bill.

It would be a disgrace to many if this committee fails to address the denial of benefits to the tens of thousands of veterans with invisible injuries incurred during their service in the military.

***Section 104. Eligibility for Post-9/11 Educational Assistance for Certain Members of Reserve Components of Armed Forces who Lost Entitlement to Educational Assistance under the Reserve Educational Assistance Program.***

**This section would allow certain members of the Reserve component to transfer into the Post-9/11 GI Bill who lost educational assistance benefits when Congress repealed the**

## **Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP).**

VVA supports this provision in that it will close another unintended loophole which has forced many Reservists to in effect place their lives on hold.

### ***Section 105. Calculation of Monthly House Stipend under Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program Based on Location of Campus where Classes are Attended.***

**This section would change the way living stipend amounts are calculated, from the current rule that says the living stipend payment is based on where the school is located to instead having the payment calculated based on where the student attends the majority of classes.**

VVA supports the intent of this section, which is to ensure that GI Bill users receive a fair stipend to support living expenses while they attend school. Under current law, the VA determines Basic Assistance for Housing (BAH) payments to student veterans based on the Zip Code where the school is certified. This can create some disparity for veterans attending schools with multiple campuses, as BAH rates can vary greatly. The VA should pay BAH rates that align with the cost of living where the student veteran is attending school, not necessarily where the school is certified.

While VVA does believe that this bill addresses an unintended imbalance in the way BAH rates are paid, we do have concerns about possible complexities arising from implementation of the bill as written. For example: How would this apply to a veteran attending classes in multiple locations at an institution that spans multiple Zip Codes?

### ***Section 106. Charge to Entitlement for Certain Licensure and Certification Tests and National Tests under Department of Veterans Affairs Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.***

**This section would change the current rules that require that a veteran be charged a whole month of entitlement to pay for any national test (GMAT, GRE, SAT, etc.) or test that is required for state licensing. Instead of a full month of entitlement, this bill would require that the test be pro-rated to the amount of the actual cost of the test.**

VVA supports this provision which will empower veterans to use the GI Bill to pay for national tests and state licensing on a pro-rated basis in a way that avoids over-charging the GI Bill user's eligibility.

***Section 107. Restoration of Entitlement to Post-9/11 Educational Assistance for Veterans Affected by Closures of Educational Institutions.***

**This section would restore entitlement to individuals when their school closes in the middle of a semester. This section would also authorize additional living stipend payments to be paid to students whose school closes in the middle of a semester for no more than four months, or the length of the semester, where they were attending training.**

The purpose of this provision is to restore eligibility for tuition, but not BAH, for student veterans who attended an institution that has unexpectedly closed. VVA supports the intent of this legislation, but urges the committee to amend it to restore BAH as well. Veterans who have had their educational paths approved and paid for by the VA, and who then experience a school closing, should not have the rug pulled out from under them.

VVA urges that the committee take a proactive approach to protecting student veterans by keeping the VA from approving GI Bill use at institutions that have questionable practices or are at risk of closure. As we have expressed many times in recent years, VVA is concerned about abuses of the GI Bill and questionable recruiting practices by institutions similar to Corinthian and ITT Tech.

According to Student Veterans of America's National Veteran Education Success Tracker (NVEST) Report, proprietary schools enroll 27 percent of GI Bill students, while taking in 40 percent of total GI Bill funding -- and only produce 19 percent of the total degree completions. By comparison, public schools enroll 56 percent of GI Bill students, take in 34 percent of total GI Bill funding, and produce 64 percent of total degree completions.

In recent years, proprietary schools have seen overall enrollment spiral down, with the proportion of GI Bill users among their student populations growing. In many cases, these schools are over-reliant on federal funding, and if GI Bill funding was considered as federal funding under the 90/10 rule, these entities would be far out of compliance.

VVA encourages this committee to work to make sure that GI Bill funding is counted as federal funds as it pertains to the 90/10 rule. This will help ensure that student veterans are not looked at as dollar signs who help pad questionable programs so that they can be in compliance with the rather liberal 90/10 rule.

***Section 108. Inclusion of Fry Scholarship Recipients in Yellow Ribbon GI Education Enhancement Program.***

**This section would extend the Yellow Ribbon Program to students receiving GI Bill payments through the Fry Scholarship program and those who received a Purple Heart after September 11, 2001. Fry recipients are surviving dependents of service members who died while on active duty.**

VVA strongly supports this section of the bill, which would ensure that survivors of troops killed in action receive the support that they deserve.

***Section 109. Additional Authorized Transfer of Unused Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Benefits to Dependents upon Death of Originally Designated Dependent.***

**This section would allow a veteran to transfer remaining months of GI Bill entitlement to another dependent if the dependent who originally received the transferred benefits dies before they can use all of the benefits. The section would also allow a dependent to transfer remaining months of GI Bill entitlement to another dependent after the death of the service member or veteran.**

VVA supports this section, which would ensure that GI Bill eligibility does not end when a military family suffers the loss of a transferee. Under current law, a veteran can transfer their GI Bill eligibility to a spouse or child. If the transferee dies, the GI Bill eligibility dies with them.

This legislation honors Shauna Hill, the 16-year-old the daughter of retired Navy Captain Edward Hill, who was killed in a car crash in December 2012. Because of the rigidity of the program, due to the fact that Captain Hill had already separated from the Navy when Shauna died, he was unable to transfer the benefit to his other daughter, Haley.

VVA is pleased that the committee is working to fix this unintended shortfall in the transferability program of the GI Bill.

***Section 110. Additional Educational Assistance Under Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program of Department of Veterans Affairs.***

**This section would authorize the VA to provide additional GI Bill funds to help a student veteran complete a STEM degree. Veterans would be eligible to apply for the program,**

**which would pay for the lesser of nine additional months of Post -9/11 GI Bill eligibility, or a lump sum of \$30,000. The amount of money that could be spent on this program would not exceed \$100,000,000 in any one fiscal year.**

VVA supports the intent of this legislation, which will empower veterans to pursue degrees that will allow them to reach their highest potential. However, VVA is weary of the idea of providing a lump sum payment to GI Bill recipients, and limiting the benefit to \$30,000 instead of allowing veterans to continue a five-year STEM program without seeing a change in benefits.

VVA understands that the \$30,000 lump sum payment and limit were set in order to control costs of this pilot program. However, we believe that this method could create significant problems for GI Bill users.

VVA recommends that the committee amend this section so that a fifth year in pursuit of a STEM degree is provided without an arbitrary cap, and to remove the lump sum payment option.

VVA hopes that the committee will recognize that other degree paths are valuable for GI Bill users and the economy. We encourage the committee to consider similar pilot programs to empower GI Bill users to pursue equally empowering degrees such as law, education, social work and those in demand for VA hiring.

***Section 111. Honoring National Service of the Members Elimination of Time Limitation for Use of Entitlement.***

Denying the GI Bill to a veteran because he or she was unable to, or chose not to, utilize the GI Bill does no good for veterans, nor for their families or taxpayers. While there are many reasons that a veteran may delay pursuing an education via the GI Bill, VVA poses three scenarios of veterans who are essentially punished because they experience a transition that does not result in their quickly going to school after leaving military service.

In one scenario, if a veteran struggles to adapt to life outside the military due to PTSD, they may find themselves simply unable to enter a scholastic environment. While a service-connected disability may qualify a veteran for Vocational Rehabilitation, which may afford them access to some benefits to gain an education, this veteran would have lost eligibility for the GI Bill's housing stipend which is a large part of what makes going to school affordable for most veterans.

In another scenario, a veteran may exit the service unable to enter school for years because they have children to care for, or because they are a caregiver to a loved one. This veteran, under

current law, is punished for fulfilling other responsibilities because they lose their eligibility for the GI Bill under what is essentially an arbitrary time limit.

On our final scenario, we have veterans who transition seamlessly out of the military and into another career. Yet, as we face an ever-changing economy, some of these veterans are bound to lose their work due to technological and industrial changes. Whereas the average American experiences career changes five to seven times throughout their life, why should a veteran be denied the opportunity to retrain through use of the GI Bill at any of these points of career change?

We are elated to see this committee agree that for those who become eligible after January 1, 2018, GI Bill recipients won't be punished for transitioning in a manner that fits an arbitrary timeline.

***Section 112 - Monthly Stipend for Certain Members of the Reserve Components of the Armed Forces Receiving Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.***

VVA supports this provision, which would close an unintended loophole that effects Reservists whose education is disrupted by their service commitments.

***Section 113. Improvement of Information Technology of the Veterans Benefits Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs.***

**This section would authorize \$30 million to improve GI Bill claims processing and complete their rules-based processing system for these claims.**

VVA favors this provision. However, we believe that rather than enact yet more legislation, Congress ought to focus on employing its oversight obligations to ensure that the VA is in fact making improvements to its IT system.

***Section 114. Department of Veterans Affairs High Technology Pilot Program.***

**This section would authorize VA to conduct a five-year pilot program that would provide veterans the opportunity to enroll in high technology courses (coding boot camp, IT certifications, etc.). VA would enter into contracts with these schools or programs and would provide tuition and fee payments on a sliding scale that incentivizes the schools to**

**graduate the student veterans and ensure they find a job in their field. The section would also authorize a living stipend equal to the Post-9/11 rate to students while they are using the benefit.**

VVA appreciates the intent of this provision, which is to increase veterans' options in receiving training in emerging technological fields, and is thankful to see this section has improved to provide greater GI Bill protections. We recognize the need for flexibility in the GI Bill in response to an evolving economy, and thank the committee for this improved version of this section, based off the VET-TEC Act.

VVA supports accountability in GI Bill programs, and appreciates efforts in this provision meant to ensure that benefits aren't wasted. However, we have concerns about possible loopholes that could be exploited by unethical organizations that would qualify for this program.

First, VVA believes that the paragraph allowing entities that have only been operational for a period of two years to qualify for the program should be amended to require programs to have been in operation for at least five years prior to enactment of this bill. This would prevent unscrupulous actors from setting up shop today in response to this pilot.

Second, we would like to see clarification of the term "meaningful employment" as it is used in Sec. 114 paragraph 5. We support the spirit of the proposal, which aims to ensure that GI Bill users are trained with valuable skills. However, if the GI Bill user accepts a job offer in a related field with a salary that is below what the training entity advertised, would that qualify as "meaningful employment"?

VVA thanks the committee for amending this provision so that the Secretary may develop approving criteria for the program in consultation with state approving agencies. However, we would prefer the word "shall" be used in place of "may."

### ***Section 201. Work-Study Allowance***

**This section would repeal the sunset date in the law that allows VA work-study benefits for outreach to student veterans and to assist state approving agencies.**

VVA supports this bipartisan provision, but suggests removal of the sunset so that the work-study program becomes permanent. An estimated three-fourths of GI Bill users are currently working full- or part-time, and most have families. Work-study can provide GI Bill participants with much-needed stability and income. VVA thanks the committee for removing

the sunset date of this provision.

***Section 202. Duration of Educational Assistance under Survivors' and Dependent' Educational Assistance Program.***

**This section would change the number of months of entitlement for individuals who become eligible for the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program from 45 months to 36 months. This would re-align this program with other GI Bill programs that provide 36 months of eligibility for educational assistance. This change would only apply to individuals who become entitled to this program on or after August 1, 2018.**

VVA supports this provision in the context of the increase in monthly benefits payable under the Survivors' and Dependent Educational Assistance Program described in section 203.

***Section 203. Increase in the Amounts of Educational Assistance Payable Under Survivors' and Dependent' Educational Assistance Program.***

**This section would increase the payment for educational assistance provided under Survivors' and Dependent' Educational Assistance Program by \$200 a month.**

VVA supports an increase in monthly payment for educational assistance provided under Survivors' and Dependent' Educational Assistance Program. This long-awaited increase, while relatively small, will help recipients avoid some debt incurred as they pursue higher education.

***Section 301. State Approving Agency Funding.***

**This section would increase the funding out of VA's mandatory account for State Approving Agencies (SAA) from \$19 million a year to \$21 million per year. This section would also authorize VA to provide an additional \$3 million annually to the SAAs out of the department's discretionary account. This section would also, beginning in fiscal year 2019, require VA to provide a cost of living adjustment increase to the SAAs budget in an amount that equals the same percentage increase as benefits provided under the Social Security Act.**

VVA believes that SAAs are essential partners in protecting users of GI Bill programs, and as such, we support Section 301 of this bill.

***Section 302. Authorization for Use of Post-9/11 Educational Assistance to Pursue Independent Study Programs at Certain Educational Institutions that are Not Institutions of Higher Learning.***

**This section would allow an eligible individual to use their GI Bill benefit for an accredited independent study program (including open circuit television) at an educational institution that is an area career and technical education school or a post-secondary vocational school providing post-secondary level education.**

VVA appreciates and supports the this section, which expands veterans' options in education and prevent veterans from having to relocate or travel long distances in order to attend classes at career technical education (CTE) centers. However, we are concerned about opening additional avenues for unscrupulous actors to abuse the GI Bill.

***Section 303. Provision of Information on Priority Enrollment for Veterans in Certain Courses of Education.***

**This section would require VA to include on its GI Bill Comparison Tool information on whether a school has a priority enrollment system in place that allows veterans to enroll in courses earlier than other students attending the school.**

VVA strongly endorses this section, which would ensure that many student veterans know as they are applying to schools whether or not they will receive the same priority registration that is often offered to students who play sports or are entering their senior year. Student veterans are by definition adults, many of whom have significant family and financial obligations which can be extremely burdensome. For the estimated 20 percent of recent combat veterans who suffer from PTSD, priority registration can serve as one additional way that schools can help to reduce their stress levels.

***Section. 304. Limitation on Use of Reporting Fees Payable to Educational Institutions and Sponsors of Programs of Apprenticeship.***

**This section would allow VA to provide a fee to schools or a sponsor of a program of apprenticeship for the reports or certifications that these institutions are required to submit to VA about the individuals at their school receiving GI Bill benefits. It would**

**require that VA provide \$16 to the institution for each individual that they certify as using GI Bill benefits. This section would also require that schools with 100 or more enrollees using GI Bill benefits may not use the funds received by the institution from the reporting fees for the institution's general fund and that these funds may only be used for veterans' programs at that institution.**

VVA supports this provision. We support increasing reporting fees to schools, so long as there are sufficient protections in place to ensure that these funds are earmarked specifically to services for GI Bill users only. Schools should not be permitted to blend VA funding fees with general funds, or use VA funding for general programming. This provision accomplishes exactly this.

These funding fees provide schools which have large contingents of GI Bill beneficiaries with ways to improve services and facilities dedicated to service members, veterans and their families. Many schools have used these funds to build and support dedicated on-campus Student Veteran Centers. These spaces are critical for many student veterans' successful transition, as they serve as a rallying point where veterans can find others with similar experiences and backgrounds. Veterans who experience camaraderie on campus are more likely to succeed in school, and as such, institutions collecting large sums of reporting fees should be encouraged to use these funds to support on-campus Student Veteran Centers.

***Section. 305. Training for School Certifying Officials.***

**This section would require VA, in consultation with the SAAs, to provide requirements for training for school certifying officials at educational institutions that are approved for GI Bill benefits. This section would also allow VA to disapprove a course of study if a school does not ensure that the school certifying official meets the training requirements.**

VVA supports this provision, which increases training requirements for the certifying officials at schools who process GI Bill benefits. This provision will protect GI Bill users from processing delays and other errors which can significantly, and negatively, impact their lives.

***Section 306. Extension of Authority for Advisory Committee on Education.***

**This section would extend by five years the authority for VA's Advisory Committee on Education from December 2017 through to December 2022.**

VVA supports this common-sense provision extending the authority for VA's Advisory Committee on Education, but asks: Why set a new expiration date? The VA's Advisory Committee on Education provides an important way for education experts to provide the VA Secretary with feedback on veterans' issues in higher education. We see no reason that this committee should not be made permanent.

We also suggest expanding this committee to include not just "veteran representatives of the Global War on Terror," but representatives of national organizations representing veterans, survivors and military families of all generations who have used, are using, or will use VA educational benefits; organizations should qualify for consideration of membership in this committee only if they have maintained a tax-deductible, not-for-profit status and have maintained policy-focused staff in an office in the Washington, DC region for at least six years.

***Section 307. Department of Veterans Affairs Provision of On-Campus Educational and Vocational Counseling for Veterans.***

**This section would codify VA's Veterans Success on Campus (VSOC) program, which is administered and overseen by the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service (VR&E). There are currently 94 schools with a VSOC program, which provides a VR&E counselor at each school to assist veterans with their transition from military to college life. They also provide support and assistance needed to pursue veterans' educational and employment goals.**

VVA supports expansion of VSOC, which places experienced Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) on campuses with high populations of GI Bill users. VSOC counselors are an invaluable resource for student veterans, particularly those with service-related illnesses and injuries and those still struggling with their transition out of the military. Placing VRCs on campus increases support for veterans in ways that schools don't otherwise provide. VSOC counselors address questions regarding VA educational benefits, health services, and general VA benefits in addition to enrolling student veterans into the VA healthcare system right there on campus.

The VSOC program, which began as a pilot in 2009, is currently on 94 campuses. This program has proven to be extremely beneficial to veterans, and should be made permanent and expanded to wherever it is practical to do so. Placing VSOC Counselors on campuses saves GI Bill users countless hours traveling to VA facilities, helping them stay focused on their studies.

Because VRCs currently have caseloads that far exceed recommended levels, VVA hopes that

Congress will work with the VA to ensure that more VRCs are hired.

***Section 308. Provision of Information Regarding Veteran Entitlement to Educational Assistance.***

**This section would require VA to make available to educational institutions the ability to view the remaining benefit amount for each veteran attending that institution. This section would also allow the veteran or their dependent (if they are a beneficiary of their GI Bill benefits) to opt out of the school's ability to receive such information from the VA.**

VVA supports this provision which will allow school certifying officials to provide GI Bill users more accurate counseling on benefits. Ensuring that GI Bill beneficiaries and certifying officials have information regarding eligibility ensures that veterans can plan their education appropriately.

***Section 309. Treatment, for Purposes of Educational Assistance Administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, of Educational Courses that Begin Seven or Fewer Days after the First Day of an Academic Year.***

**This section would provide more flexibility to school certifying officials if the first day of a course does not start on the first day of an academic term, by allowing the school certifying official to certify the course as beginning on the first day of the academic term for purposes of certifying a veteran for GI Bill benefits.**

***Section 401. Eligibility of Reserve Component Members for Post 9/11 Educational Assistance.***

**This section would make individuals eligible for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits who have served and who will serve on 12304, 12304(a) and 12304(b) orders. Any active-duty service under these Reserve component orders since the enactment of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 would apply for such benefits going forward.**

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***Section 402. Time Limitation for Training and Rehabilitation for Veterans with Service-Connected Disabilities.***

**This section would also make the 12304, 12304(a) and 12304(b) orders eligible for benefits under the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program in chapter 31 of title 38, U.S.C.**

VVA also supports sections 401 & 402, which seek to close unintended loopholes created by the Armed Services Committees and the Department of Defense in response to today's ever-changing global wars.

VVA would appreciate if the committee would consider amending this legislation in a manner that would prevent DoD from creating new orders that put troops downrange without allowing them to earn the eligibility for the benefits they deserve.

***Section 501. Repeal Inapplicability of Modification of Basic Allowance for Housing to Benefits under Laws Administered by Secretary of Veterans Affairs.***

**This section would be the offset for the package by realigning the living stipend payments for those using the Post 9/11 GI Bill (E-5 with dependents' rate) to the same Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) payments currently paid to active-duty service members at the E-5 with dependents' rate. Several years ago, the annual percentage increase to active duty BAH payments were reduced by 1 percent a year for five years, but GI bill payments were exempt. This bill would re-align these payments so that a GI Bill recipient would receive the same living stipend per month as an E-5 active duty service member with dependents.**

VVA believes that BAH across active duty and GI Bill users should remain bound so that GI Bill recipients would receive the same living stipend per month as an E-5 active-duty service member with dependents. We believe that, in the context of this bill, the budget offset created by this section is appropriate as it allows other sections of this bill to invest in improving the GI Bill's implementation.

**In conclusion,** VVA is thankful to the members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and to committee staff, for the time and dedication that it took to develop what is truly a remarkable bipartisan bill. We also thank Student Veterans of America and all of the member organizations of the informal *Forever GI Bill Coalition* for their role in seeing this bill develop. We look forward to enactment of , and to future efforts to expand and improve the GI Bill. Most

importantly, we hope to see the committee address the fact that nearly 12 percent of veterans who were discharged between Fiscal Years 2011-2015 left the service ineligible for the GI Bill.

VVA welcomes and will respond to any questions members of this committee may have.

# **VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA**

## **Funding Statement**

March 29, 2017

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For further information, contact:

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## **Kristofer Goldsmith**

### **Assistant Director for Policy and Government Affairs**

Kristofer Goldsmith joined the Policy and Government Affairs team at Vietnam Veterans of America in May 2016. Mr Goldsmith advises Members of Congress and the administration on the implementation of policy regarding “new veterans” across the government.

Born in New York, Mr Goldsmith joined the Army to serve a forward observer with the Army’s Third Infantry Division shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. He deployed with Alpha Company of the 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom for the year of 2005.

Since separating from the Army with a General discharge after surviving a post-traumatic stress disorder-related suicide attempt, Mr Goldsmith has since become an advocate for veterans with PTSD and those with less-than-honorable discharges.

As a disabled student veteran using Vocational Rehabilitation, Mr Goldsmith found both an opportunity to recover from PTSD and to continue serving his fellow veterans. At Nassau Community College, he established a million-dollar Veteran Resource Facility which serves as a center for hundreds of transitioning student veterans. After two years as President of NCC’s Student Veterans of America chapter, he transitioned to Columbia University’s School of General Studies to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Political Science.

Mr Goldsmith is the founder and chair of High Ground Veterans Advocacy, a 501c3 not-for-profit which partners with military and veterans service organizations to train vets to become grassroots advocates and leaders both nationally, and in their local communities. High Ground Veterans Advocacy was recognized on the HillVets 100 list of 2016 as one of the nation’s top new veterans organizations.

Mr Goldsmith has dedicated his entire adult life to serving this country and its veterans, and looks forward to many more years advocating for his brothers and sisters in arms. He believes it is the responsibility of today’s young veterans to keep the motto of VVA alive: “Never Again Will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another.”