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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
LEGISLATIVE HEARING
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Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss H.R. 3974, the *Grow Our Own Directive: Physician Assistant Employment and Education Act of 2015*. Our full committee has worked hard to improve veteran access to health care, and to create opportunities for veteran education and employment. This legislation would allow us to merge those efforts and allow veterans to continue serving their country while in service to their fellow veterans.

In the 14 and a half years since September 11th, and the 13 years since the invasion of Iraq, the men and women of the United States military have repeatedly demonstrated their skill, valor, and professionalism. They have repeatedly placed their lives on the line, been separated from their families, and deferred their own personal life goals in order to serve this country.

As many in this room recognize, that service on our behalf creates an obligation on our part to ensure veterans have the opportunity to succeed and have access to the medical care they may require.

Veterans today often leave the service with an incredible skill set. Our corpsmen and medics have proven medical experience in high pressure training and real world environments. They have also demonstrated an interest in public service by volunteering to serve in the military, and many hope to continue in service to the public after they leave active duty. Meanwhile, as this subcommittee in particular knows all too well, veterans often face many challenges in accessing care. As we discussed last week, sometimes this is due to IT and scheduling challenges. Other times it is due to the lack of providers available.

In a time of shortages for primary care providers both in the private sector and in the VA, and with the Office of Inspector General listing physician assistants as one of the VA's top five occupations with the largest staffing shortages, creating a pathway of opportunity for our veterans to fill that gap and continue to serve their country seems to me like an excellent opportunity.

H.R. 3974 would accomplish that objective by creating a pilot program to provide educational assistance to qualifying veterans for education and training as VA physician assistants. A veteran would qualify for this program who has medical or military health experience gained while serving in the Armed Forces; has received a certificate, associate degree, baccalaureate degree, master's degree, or post-baccalaureate training in a science relating to health care; has participated in the delivery of health

care services or related medical services; and does not have a doctorate in medicine, osteopathy, or dentistry.

Eligible veterans would be able to apply during the five year pilot program to receive one of 35 scholarships available each year to cover the costs of obtaining a master's degree in physician assistant studies or a similar master's degree.

Selection would be prioritized for those veterans that participated in an earlier veteran recruitment program known as the Intermediate Care Technician Pilot Program and those veterans agreeing to be employed by the VHA in a community that is medically underserved and in a state with a significant veteran population.

Those veterans that use the program would then owe the VHA a period of obligated service based either on the scholarship program used, or three years.

To ensure that veterans are prepared to succeed, participants will be paired with a mentor at their facility, and the VA shall partner with institutions of higher learning to guarantee physician assistant educational seats.

As it is currently written, the bill would also establish standards to improve the education and hiring of VA physician assistants and enhance retention and recruitment through competitive pay standards.

As this bill moves through the House and the Senate, there have already been several discussions to find ways to improve the bill, increase its chances at passage, and create this opportunity for our veterans. I am happy to continue those conversations in the coming days and weeks based on feedback from this hearing.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or our fellow members of the Subcommittee may have.