



TESTIMONY OF
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
PENDING LEGISLATION

March 29, 2023

Chair Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and Esteemed Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit a Statement for the Record on legislation before you today.

With a mission focused on empowering student veterans, SVA is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated and expansive network of on-campus chapters across the country, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders.

Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential.

H.R. 808 – The Veterans Patient Advocacy Act

SVA fully supports the Veterans Patient Advocacy Act (H.R. 808), which represents a crucial step toward improving the quality of customer service and care for our nation's veterans. This bill would require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure that no fewer than one Patient Advocate is available for every 13,500 veterans enrolled in the system of annual patient enrollment. This increase in staffing would allow VA to better assist veterans with their complaints, resulting in reduced frustration, improved accountability, and a higher quality experience.

Patient Advocates play a vital role in helping veterans, including student veterans, express concerns about their treatment and resolve any problems with their care providers. However, well-documented issues, including staffing and workload challenges, have limited the effectiveness and ability of Patient Advocates to adequately serve veterans in need. According to the VA, there are currently only 550 Patient Advocates nationwide, with at least one full-time position per VA Medical Center in accordance with the current VHA Directive 1003.04.¹ The national average caseload for a Patient Advocate is around 1,025 inquiries annually.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) documented many concerns with the Patient Advocate program, including staffing and workload issues, in an April 2018 report.² According to the report, there was near universal concern among the VA Medical Center officials interviewed by GAO about program staff workload.³ The report details how backlogs have resulted in basic administrative tasks, among other things, going unaddressed. Consider this particularly concerning excerpt from the report.

Officials from one VAMC [GAO] spoke with in July 2017 stated that due to workload demands and not enough patient advocacy program staff at their VAMC, they had roughly 300 unanswered phone calls at that time from veterans who wanted to provide feedback to a patient advocate. Officials from several VSOs we spoke with stated that there is not enough patient advocate staff, adding that veterans reported that their calls to patient advocates were not answered, they were unable to reach an advocate, or their calls were not responded to in a timely manner.⁴

This bill would help solve the staffing issues in the Patient Advocate program by requiring VA to hire an additional 78 Patient Advocates, with the expectation that 35 of them placed at Community-Based Outpatient Clinics where there was no physical presence of a Patient Advocate previously. SVA urges the Subcommittee to support and

¹ E-mail from congressional staff to author concerning current program staffing levels provided by VA in response congressional inquiry on file with author (March 24, 2023) (on file with author).

² See generally U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-18-356, VA HEALTH CARE: IMPROVED GUIDANCE AND OVERSIGHT NEEDED FOR THE PATIENT ADVOCACY PROGRAM (2018).

³ *Id.* at 13.

⁴ *Id.*

pass the Veterans Patient Advocacy Act, which is an excellent next step toward addressing the challenges faced by veterans using the Patient Advocate program.

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The continued success of veterans in higher education in the Post-9/11 era is no mistake or coincidence. In our Nation's history, educated veterans have always been the best of a generation and the key to solving our most complex challenges. This is the legacy we know today's student veterans carry.

We thank the Chair, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education.