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Testimony of Hayleigh Perez

House Committee On Veterans Affairs

Sub-Committee on Economic Opportunity

Legislative Hearing on “Current Functionality of Long-Term Solution (LTS) for Processing Post 9/11 GI Bill Claims”

February 14, 2013

Chairman Flores and Respective Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before your subcommittee today.

My name is Hayleigh Perez. As a female Veteran having served on active-duty in the U.S. Army, a wife and mother, a student Veteran, and currently the Vice President of Social Media with the Student Veterans Advocacy Group, I feel very proud to be here speaking on such a relevant topic effecting thousands of student Veterans around our country today.

The words, "Freedom isn't free" are so very true, yet our Veterans today seem to be so demonized as though we are asking for something that's not already ours. Our Veterans should never have to ask, and sometimes beg for the very things we were promised for the sacrifices made to protect our great nation.

As in any good business...taking care of those whom take care of you, builds strength we all benefit from. While the economy is tough, statistics prove that taking care of our Veterans through the benefits promised to them, yields one of the highest return on investments of any others out there...period. By doing so, our Veterans are given the square deal promised to them, which yields such a high return that will benefit the rebuilding of our local, state, and national economy as a whole.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, *“A man who is good enough to shed his blood for the country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards.”*

Based on research and assessments many universities as well as our organization have been able to work on regarding the number of Veterans whom are enrolling at a school of higher education due to interrupted studies resulting from active-duty service, and those whom are enrolling for the first time, we have determined:

* *Prior to 2011, nearly 75% of student Veterans were using the GI Bill to complete their education after interruptions from active-duty service obligations.*
* *After 2011, only based on information we’ve collected from various service-members whom have only served in the military after 2008 and recently having completed their active-duty service obligations, approximately 67% of them are attending a traditional classroom setting in a two-year or four-year college for the first time.*

According to American Counsel on Education (ACE) research:

* *“only 64% of Post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries who responded to surveys anticipated they could finish their degrees on time. Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, qualified veterans are allowed 36 months to complete their education. To accomplish this, veterans specified that courses must be made available when they need them and cited the importance of receiving academic credit for military service and training. The main two factors that contribute to graduating on time are course availability and course credit.”*
* *“Because of the size of their student populations, course availability is a larger concern at public universities. Veterans get the courses they need by taking approved classes at accredited schools near their primary institution.”*
* *“According to an ACE survey, only 47% of veterans who made an attempt to transfer credits were satisfied with the results. Veterans most often receive course credit for degree programs at private schools by finding allies such as academic advisors and professors who advocate on their behalf and initiate appeals. This helps them transfer more course credit and ensures that they will graduate on time.”*

There are considerable challenges and obstacles facing student Veterans today different than in times past. Such challenges our student Veterans are facing today are a result of the short-sited decisions being made by the Federal, and some State governments due to the financial hardships facing our Nation. History has proven post-war is the worst recession, and best economical boom our Nation experiences, versus other time-periods. Part of such success is due to the positive impact educating our Veterans has on the economy, which is paramount to the growth needed today.

Many Veterans are finding it extremely difficult to adjust back to civilian life for a multitude of reasons. Let’s keep in mind a big difference with the ten-year war in Iraq and Afghanistan contrary to past wars, is that our service-members have survived at a higher rate than prior wars. Of course, that’s a blessing, but it also precipitates a much greater need for preparation and care at home our nation wasn’t ready for.

As a result of the unanticipated transitional difficulties from the backlog of delayed processing of VA claims: many service-members, Veterans, and families thereof, are suffering from unforeseen hardships that could otherwise be avoided.

**WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?**

**Processing Delays**

Student Veterans are often faced with extreme financial hardships when transitioning into school for the first time, starting new semesters, or changing schools or programs. When following up with their paperwork, student Veterans often realize they and the Universities have done everything on their end to ensure timely processing of claims – though months often pass with no payment and no answer from VA as to the reasoning for such delay.

The way by which current VA GI Bill claims are being processed needs significant improvements. Many of our nations student Veterans are relying on their earned GI Bill benefits for groceries, child care, bills, etc., and the delinquency by which these funds are being disbursed, or not, are often times life-altering causing some consequences as extreme as leaving some student Veterans homelessness.

A fellow student Veteran, Juan M. Beltran from Silver Springs, Maryland wrote to our organization, stating:

 “*There is a little known book called,* ***When the War Comes Home*** *by Aaron Glantz. In his concluding chapters, Glantz speaks to the uphill battles veterans have had in obtaining Veterans benefits over the past 60 years, battle that undoubtedly continues.*

 *“Members of Congress and bureaucrats at the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs may not be attacking vets with mortars and IEDs, but they are literally killing them with indifference”, Glantz writes on page 212.”*

This past semester, beginning Graduate school, I experienced this first-hand. When I first contacted the VA in January, I was told there was not even a record of my attending Graduate school, which I began attending a week earlier. After resubmitting the same documents I sent already sent in November of 2012, I was told to follow-up in a week. After calling the VA every week for over 5-weeks I finally made it through the never ending hold-time with the VA and spoke to a very nice woman by the name of Yvonne, whom located all of the information and forms I’d already filed in November of 2012 in addition to all of my inquiries, whereby she was able to actually process my book-stipend and housing allowance payments. Within a few days I received the funds I was owed, my certificate of benefits from the previous school I’d never received, as well as the one I needed for Graduate school.

The prevailing question our organization posed with respect to the similar issues thousands of student Veterans have been, and are currently facing was:

*Why was Yvonne able to resolve my GI Bill issues while the 4 other VA representatives I previously spoke with not able to?*

I asked this question of Yvonne when discussing my issues and was told the VA Educational Assistance Department is currently using two different software programs that cannot communicate with one another. Therefore, if my information was entered into one program but not the other, the representatives working with the other software program cannot assist me because they can’t find my information, while it all resides within the other software program.

**Potential Solutions**

1. Consolidate the two software programs currently being used by the VA Educational Assistance Program to one standard software program.

 *By consolidating the software programs to one standard program, all VA representatives would have equal access in addressing any GI Bill beneficiary claims issue, whereby resolving beneficiary problems in a more timely manner. This would also assist in maximizing productivity for the VA and its representatives, while reducing the financial burden facing thousands of student Veterans. The outcome of applying this would be a considerable cast-savings measure to both the GI Bill beneficiaries as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, which would certainly help reduce spending for our Federal Government.*

1. Re-education and certified training for all VA representatives, in addition to required annual training for changes and updates to the software program being utilized by the VA.

 *This is one of the largest observable downfalls with respect to current deficiencies in how the VA processes GI Bill education benefits claims.*

1. Education and re-training of all VA representatives on all forms, past, present, and future, of the GI Bill (chapter 30, 33, etc).

 *Many emails the Student Veterans Advocacy Group receives from student Veterans complain about the lack of GI Bill knowledge one would think is necessary in order to work in the Educational Assistance Program for the VA.*

1. Each Student Veteran should have a VA representative assigned to them on a local, state, or regional basis.

 *By assigning each GI Bill beneficiary an individual representative for their claim, communication would be far better, and personable as well. Being able to contact or email an individual representative would help reduce the debilitating complaints currently stagnating the VA. This measure can additionally ensure more compliance, accountability, and continuity are being met by the VA.*

**Conclusion**

Our society today is overstated with the “blank-checks” it offers to one group or another. The difference between student Veterans and other groups is that they’re not asking for any more, or less, than what’s owed them for their sacrifices in-service to protect our nation. We’re not asking for a hand-down, hand-up, or hand-out. Rather - we’re merely asking for the benefit we’ve fought for, died for, and earned, in defending the freedoms our great nation continues to enjoy.

Have we really fallen so far from where America once was that we resolve ourselves to believe if we’re not personally affected, then it doesn’t matter? While in many ways having become disenfranchised with some of the questionable actions by our government I can still honestly say that I would sacrifice my life to secure the liberties and freedoms we have in America. So, is really too much to ask that our government fulfill its’ obligations, as intended, to our service-members and Veterans?

To this end, you *(Members of the House Sub-Committee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs)* have a tremendous opportunity to be heroes to the Veterans and families, whom have served our great Nation. With your dedication and leadership, our Veterans can be better able to assist in the future successes our economy and country so desperately need.

Character is defined not just by what we say we’re going to do, but what we do following what we say. As Theodore Roosevelt once said, *“when making any decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”*The right thing to do for our Veterans is reflected best through our actions, not rhetoric.

Very Respectfully,

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