

STATEMENT OF
SHERROD CONYERS, CALIFORNIA DELEGATE
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES
BEFORE THE
VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE
ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITH RESPECT TO

Examining Higher Education Institutions' Services to Veterans

RIVERSIDE, CA

November 4, 2013

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to offer the VFW's perspective on the services our colleges and universities offer to student veterans.

As a current conflict veteran, I understand first-hand how difficult the transition can be from military to civilian life. For student veterans in particular, the culture shock of going from military life to college life can be particularly daunting. This is why campus resources specifically for student veterans have been so critical to veterans' success in higher education.

For years the VFW has been at the forefront of improving educational opportunities for veterans who have served since 9/11. The VFW championed the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which recently turned five years old. Last year we championed legislation to improve consumer information and consumer protections for veterans through the *Improving Transparency in Education for Veterans Act*, which was signed into law in early January. This year, the VFW is fighting for in-state tuition for veterans at public colleges and universities, seeking to ensure veterans can maximize their benefits at the publicly-funded school of their choice.

But the VFW believes that we not only have the obligation to ensure that veterans have access to higher education, but we have the obligation to ensure they can graduate and find quality careers. Recent accomplishments like the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Transparency Act are designed to

ensure that veterans are academically and financially prepared to go to college, but they do little to ensure that veterans will actually graduate. This is where college-specific services to student veterans play a critical role.

Over the last few years, many colleges and universities have stepped up to improve their on-campus services to veterans, and we applaud those kinds of initiatives. The VFW echoes the sentiment of our colleagues at Student Veterans of America (SVA) when they say that the investment of a college or university in its veterans has to start at the top. We agree that college presidents must have a vested interest in the veterans' community on their campus, or those veterans will face significant hurdles establishing veteran-specific services.

To the VFW, a model college campus embraces three basic concepts: Student veterans who are organized within the student body; buy-in from top campus administration, to include the college president, through which policies are crafted and resources allocated to support veterans; and dedicated physical space to veterans' resources beyond the school certifying official.

The first concept is simple: Veterans should come together on campus to offer mutual aide, assistance and camaraderie to their veteran peers. Moreover, organized student veteran groups must make a concerted effort to become an integral part of campus life by either organizing events like community fundraisers or participating in campus events like intramural sports. The VFW has seen many successful models for this around the nation – particularly from student veteran organizations under the SVA umbrella at more than 800 college campuses from coast to coast. One example is at Rutgers University in New Jersey where newly-matriculated Iraq and Afghanistan veterans founded a small campus group in 2008 dedicated to supporting their fellow veterans, educating their educators about the veterans' community, giving back to campus, and improving veterans' services. Today, the student veterans at Rutgers are a critical cog in campus decision-making, and a well-respected group within the student body.

The second concept is many times the most difficult to accomplish, but the veterans' community has made considerable headway over the last few years. At first, many college presidents do not readily recognize the diversity of ideas and experience that college-bound veterans bring to campus. However, once recognizing this, college presidents are quick to buy in, ensuring their student veterans can be best served by their institution. One example is nearby San Diego State University where student veterans made their case to college leadership who in turn identified gaps and offered services and campus resources wherever they could – such as an old fraternity house now used exclusively for campus veterans. Today, San Diego State boasts one of the nation's most engaged veterans' communities on campus and the largest student veteran population in California.

Another example is right here at Riverside City College, where the administration recognized the need for priority enrollment for student veterans. Unlike federal student aid, GI Bill programs have a finite timeline and dollar amount with which a veteran can earn a degree. This means that veterans cannot mark time waiting for required degree courses to open up. Riverside recognized this and extended priority registration to all recently-separated veterans and GI Bill beneficiaries to ensure they can enroll in necessary classes and graduate in a timely manner.

The final concept is often a product of the second. Last November, California State University Fullerton opened its veterans' center, where veterans can meet throughout the day, speak with educational advisors, take advantage of peer tutoring, or learn about available veterans' benefits. Similar veterans' centers are also up and running right here at Riverside, at San Diego State, and other campuses around California.

Since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, many colleges have recognized the wealth of knowledge and experience our veterans bring to the community. Some of the nation's most elite schools, like Columbia University and Georgetown, have built robust veterans' communities on campus capable of molding the leaders of tomorrow as we intended. However, there is still room for improvement.

The VFW has followed closely the growth and success of VA's VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program. What started as a one-campus pilot in 2009 quickly expanded to eight campuses by the end of 2011; 17 campuses in 2012; 32 in 2013 and a proposed 94 campuses in 2014. VSOC offers VA-specific resources directly to veterans on college campuses. This program has been invaluable to the colleges that have been fortunate enough to be added to the list. However, the VFW believes this program has the potential to reach hundreds of other campuses around the country.

The VFW also remains concerned that many schools still do not fully acknowledge American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations for military training when veterans enroll. Currently, Servicemember Opportunity Colleges (SOC) consortium participants must have policies in place to evaluate and accept military academic credits. Unfortunately, most schools are not SOC participants. We understand that Congress cannot legislate the acceptance and transfer of military credits, but the VFW would prefer to see GI Bill-eligible schools acknowledge military academic credits and implement reasonable policies to accept credits where applicable.

The VFW also believes that financial concerns continue to impede academic progress for student veterans. The cost of college is a concern for all Americans, and even though many veterans have access to the robust Post-9/11 GI Bill, most veterans still face significant out-of-pocket costs to finance their education. With this in mind, the VFW continues to advocate for in-state tuition for recently-separated Post-9/11 GI Bill veterans. As written, the Post-9/11 GI Bill only reimburses in-state tuition and fees for veterans attending public schools. Sadly, many veterans attending public schools cannot qualify for in-state tuition because the transience of military life has made them ineligible. Since these policies vary disparately state by state, the VFW believes that we must offer reasonable in-state tuition protections for student veterans on a national level, especially for veterans who cannot qualify because of circumstances beyond their control.

Finally, the VFW also believes that schools accepting GI Bill dollars should offer priority enrollment to student veterans if they offer priority enrollment to other student groups, like student athletes. I explained earlier in my testimony why this was such a critical issue for veterans who have a finite time in which to use their benefits. Many schools, like Riverside City College, have already stepped up to offer priority enrollment to foster student veteran success, but we believe that more can be done to ensure GI Bill-eligible schools adopt similar policies.

As you can see, campus services for veterans play a key role in ensuring student veteran success in higher education. We have seen significant improvement in this area since the passage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, but we must continue to do better. We have several opportunities to get this right at the federal level, and the VFW stands ready to assist as we have always done in the past.

Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, this concludes my statement and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2013, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.