



Written Testimony of Ms. Lourdes E. (Alfie) Alvarado-Ramos

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Chairman Flores, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, my name is Alfie Alvarado-Ramos. I am the Director of the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs. Please accept my sincerest appreciation for inviting me and the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) to submit testimony on defining and improving success for student veterans.

Mr. Chairman, for the past 13 years, thousands of active duty personnel have been stationed at Washington's numerous Army, Navy and Air Force installations. They and their families have endured multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and other parts of the world. Alongside them have served record numbers of Washington's citizen soldiers from the reserves and National Guard. Together they have done a fantastic job of protecting our nation and accomplishing their mission. They and their families have shouldered untold burdens and made many sacrifices. And fortunately, as the conflict winds down, the time has now come for them to come home and resume their lives as civilians.

That is why Washington State, our Governor Jay Inslee, and my agency, is fully committed, and very aggressive, in our efforts to support military service members, veterans and their families -- both as they serve and as they transition from military life.

We have focused particular attention on the many service members and veterans who are choosing to use their Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits as a first avenue of choice for transition to civilian life. We fully recognize that they are non-traditional students whose needs and capabilities are unique among the student population. We understand their need of support to overcome financial, housing, transportation and adjustment issues before they can even begin to navigate our higher education system. They require a network of people they trust, namely their peers, and a welcoming and supportive community to be successful in completing their higher education, training or certification goals.

Mr. Chairman, with that in mind, I would like to highlight the importance of an AmeriCorps Program known as Vet Corps, piloted in Washington State in 2012, as a means for providing that support.

But before I tell the subcommittee about the success we've had with this program, let me first say that much more needs to be done with the transition assistance programs as a whole. Our efforts on the education front will only be as successful as our overall transition assistance programs. That is why WDVA has been developing a comprehensive transition assistance program with the help of Joint Base Lewis McChord (JBLM) that seeks to create a warm hand-

off and improve data sharing between all stakeholders by using unique technology solutions such as our Veterans Application (VAPP).

Partners for Veteran Supportive Campuses

Prior to developing the Vet Corps Model, Washington State took the initiative to assemble our Governor, state agency directors and higher education officials to develop a statewide Memorandum of Understanding known as [Partners for Veteran Supportive Campuses](#).

This MOU sought to:

- Increase awareness of veteran's programs on and off campus
- Provide staff members with a core set of veteran cultural competencies
- Encourage campuses to implement best practices and policies designed to foster social support, acceptance, a welcoming environment, and a setting that meaningfully acknowledges the contributions of our veterans
- Encourage veterans to use GI Bill benefits
- Help veterans succeed in higher education and training
- Ensure staff and veterans have access to services through WDVA and its federal and local partners

Today, 29 individual colleges and universities across Washington State have signed on individually and proudly display their Partners Certificate.

This MOU brought forward the need to more closely support veterans on individual campuses through activities such as peer-to-peer counseling and assistance navigating the complexities of veteran benefits and services. Also apparent was the unique need for veteran students to be able to identify themselves as a 'team-member' in a way that mimicked the camaraderie of life in the military.



Vet Corps

To further these efforts, Washington State applied for grant funds through a new AmeriCorps program to better assist veterans in their transition. Through the new Vet Corps Program, Washington State assumed that a veteran connected to other veterans as well as benefits and services, would be more likely to complete their course of study and less likely to drop out. We had to assume because the data to support this hypothesis simply did not exist. We lacked the means to track the outcomes produced by our intervention. Still we moved forward, driven by the results we could measure.

Currently the Vet Corps program exists on 45 separate campuses with a total of 50 individuals participating in AmeriCorps national service.

During the 2013-2014 program year, the following milestones were achieved:

- Provided services to 12,239 veterans and military family members at 45 colleges, Warrior Transition Battalion, Sarge's Place and Joint Base Lewis McChord ACAP.

- 75.31% surveyed at time of service would return to the Vet Corps member for services, 73.44% reported that they have a better understanding of how to utilize their VA benefits.
- In the last three years, direct creation of 25 college veteran resource room where none previously existed.
- 444 confirmed referrals to WDVA programs, 517 referrals to Federal VA programs, 1290 referrals to independent Veterans Service Organizations, and 1170 confirmed connections to on campus resources with the majority of veterans being supported in referral to Financial Aid.
- 838 individual mentor mentee relationships being tracked.

Vet Corps members participate in various activities including:

- “Welcome aboard” presentations to new incoming student veterans
- Homeless veterans outreach, securing jackets, shelter and food for student veterans at risk of homelessness
- Developing Veteran Tutor centers, veteran welcoming environment
- Implementation of Veterans Safe Zone programs at colleges across the state

The Vet Corps effort in Washington is just one example of how the state is proactively working to ensure smooth transitions from military to civilian life.

Since 2009, the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs has been working with leaders at Joint Base Lewis McChord to ensure military personnel had a realistic path for their civilian future. Today, with the help of Governor Inslee’s Military Transition Council, military personnel separating from JBLM are guided toward one of four transition tracks:

1. Education
2. Entrepreneurship
3. Apprenticeship
4. Employment

We are currently working to expand the program developed on JBLM to all military installations located in Washington State. However, like with the VetCorps we lack the ability to effectively capture, transfer and analyze data to ensure we are making the most effective use of our intervention and support efforts.

Broader Transition Assistance Coordination Is Still Needed.

While we know the Vet Corps and Military Transition efforts will have significant positive impacts on veterans and their families, we lack the technology to appropriately monitor and track each veteran who accessed the services.

Washington State has requested and continues to seek support for the pilot technology solution that I mentioned earlier in this testimony. This solution will allow military commanders to monitor

their success against VOW Act metrics, and allow Washington State Programs, such as the Vet Corps to monitor how successful veterans are in their higher education efforts.

Mr. Chairman, attached to this testimony is an illustration of the pilot program showing several phases of the pilot (see *attachment*). As I said, we fundamentally believe that if our nation is going to be successful in helping our veterans transition to civilian life, whether it be through higher education, job training or job placement, we must have a more robust and integrated transition assistance effort.

Thank you for inviting me to submit testimony on this important topic. We look forward to working with the subcommittee in the future on this and the many other issues facing our nation's veterans.