

STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

BEFORE THE

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Takano, and other Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) efforts to help Veterans achieve success in their educational endeavors. I will discuss implementation of the VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program, Public Law (P.L.) 112-249, and the "Million Records Project" undertaken through a partnership with the Student Veterans of America (SVA) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC).

We are committed to ensuring that our Nation's Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists, and qualifying dependents receiving VA education benefits have access to high-quality educational opportunities that will enhance their ability to meet their academic and career objectives. The expansion of the VSOC program, the outreach efforts enacted in accordance with P.L. 112-249, and the data being made available as a result of the Million Records initiative will help foster educational success and provide

information on how Veterans are performing in their educational pursuits. My testimony today will highlight the achievements made through these efforts.

VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC)

Beginning in 2009, VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service has worked to implement and expand the VSOC program, deploying Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) to select school locations to help students succeed during their transition from active duty to the college environment. VR&E Service continues to enhance all aspects of the VSOC program to increase its effectiveness. In fiscal year (FY) 2012, VA had a total of 32 VSOC campus locations. In FY 2013, 62 additional VRCs were added to the VSOC program, which now includes 79 VRCs located at 94 institutions of higher learning (IHL).

The VSOC program and counselors, through education and career counseling (title 38, Chapter 36) services, provide students seamless access to VA benefits and services and support their successful integration on college and university campuses.

We are continuing our efforts to enhance support to Veterans on campus across a wide range of benefits and services. At each school site, VSOC counselors are working with their university partners to establish a student mentoring program. The goal of the mentoring program is to assist students with the challenges and/or stressors of entering or returning to an academic environment. VSOC counselors also collaborate with VA Medical Centers and campus counseling centers to ensure that students are aware of available mental health services and receive referrals as necessary to support their needs.

In addition, the Corporation for National and Community Service has entered into an interagency agreement with VA to enhance supportive services for Veterans on campus. The VetSuccess AmeriCorps members are now supporting the VSOC counselor in conducting outreach events and coordinating on-campus activities and services based on student needs.

VR&E Service is developing a strategy to determine the way ahead to best align resources for the optimal VSOC coverage at school sites with significant Veteran populations. This initiative is considering current VSOC sites, schools with interest in hosting future VSOC counselors, the number of Veterans attending schools under VA education programs, and schools' proximity to both VA health care facilities and military installations.

Carrying Out P.L. 112-249

P.L. 112-249, enacted on January 10, 2013 which enhances and complements the provisions of Executive Order 13607, requires VA to develop a comprehensive policy to improve outreach and transparency to Veterans and Servicemembers through the provision of information on IHLs, and to deploy online tools to implement the policy. The law also requires VA to develop a centralized mechanism for tracking and publishing feedback from students and State Approving Agencies (SAA) regarding the quality of instruction at IHLs, their recruiting practices, and post-graduation employment placement. The law prohibits VA from approving any course offered by an educational institution that provides any commission, bonus, or other incentive payment based directly or indirectly on success in securing enrollments or financial aid. Finally, it

requires VA to perform two market surveys related to academic readiness and commercially available, off-the-shelf, online comparison tools.

VA partnered with the Department of Education (ED), Department of Defense, Consumer Finance Protection Bureau, Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Department of Justice (DOJ), and the National Association of State Approving Agencies to implement P.L. 112-249. As required by this law, VA submitted a report to Congress in April of 2013 that included a description of the comprehensive policy, VA's plan to implement the policy, and the results of the market surveys conducted to determine the availability of commercial off-the-shelf online tools.

As a result of the required market surveys, VA began piloting an online assessment tool called CareerScope® that gives prospective students career recommendations based on interests and aptitudes, and also provides information on related courses and training programs. Since August 2013, nearly 10,000 individuals have started or completed the free assessment. VA conducted another market survey for an online tool that provides prospective students with a list of providers of postsecondary education and training opportunities based on specific criteria selected by the individual. We discovered that many online tools provide much of the required information; however, none of the Web sites provide all of the data required by law. As a result, VA built an online tool that aggregates information from existing Web sites to provide all of the required data.

The GI Bill® Comparison Tool, which launched on February 4, 2014 pursuant to the Executive Order and Public Law, helps Veterans become informed postsecondary education consumers. It displays median borrowing amounts, graduation rates, and

loan-default rates by school, and it also indicates whether or not the school participates in the Yellow Ribbon Program or has agreed to adhere to the Principles of Excellence prescribed by Executive Order 13607. The tool allows beneficiaries to estimate the amount of funding they may receive under the Post-9/11 GI Bill®. The tool was recently featured by Dr. Jill Biden on NBC's Today Show while celebrating the three-year anniversary of the First Lady's and Dr. Biden's Joining Forces Initiative. As of April 11, 2014, there have been 133,970 unique visitors who have used the tool.

VA will continue exploring the development and refinement of the GI Bill® Comparison Tool. Some of the new features and functionalities we are considering include improving the school/employer search capability, incorporating the ability to compare multiple schools side-by-side, providing school-specific GI Bill benefit calculations, displaying feedback and/or complaints about a particular school, and displaying Veteran-specific outcome information, among many other features. These further enhancements would allow Veterans to compare schools across more dimensions and at a finer level of detail.

Pursuant to Executive Order 13607, VA developed and launched the GI Bill® Feedback System, a centralized online reporting system that allows Veterans, Servicemembers, Reservists, and eligible dependents to report negative experiences with educational institutions. Depending upon the nature of the complaint, VA may serve as an intermediary between the student and school to assist in the resolution of the complaint, or VA may launch a targeted risk-based review of the school. Complaints may also be reviewed by state and Federal law enforcement agencies, including DOJ. VA began accepting complaints through the GI Bill® Feedback System

when it was launched on January 30, 2014. As of April 13, 2014, there have been 16,701 individuals who have viewed the Feedback System's information Webpage, 3,671 individuals who logged into the system, and 1,269 submitted complaints. In March 2014, VA began transmitting the complaints to the centralized FTC Consumer Sentinel database, where they are accessible by law enforcement agencies.

VA has successfully completed several other activities needed to meet the requirements of Executive Order 13607 and P.L. 112-249 since January 2013. Specifically, VA updated the School Certifying Official handbook; published student outcome measure definitions on ED's College Navigator; registered the GI Bill® Trademark; and began enforcing legal terms of use of the trademark.

Million Records Initiative

VA established an agreement with SVA to create a new education completion database for Post-9/11 GI Bill and Montgomery GI Bill beneficiaries in order to study the outcomes of these VA education programs. VA also established an agreement with NSC to match VA's records and provide graduation and program completion information. The resulting data set contains information on Veteran beneficiaries enrolled in education programs from 2002 through 2013. NSC was an available source for tracking student completion rates at the individual level. . After NSC matched the VA records, the de-identified results were released to SVA for analysis.

On March 24, 2014, SVA released the "Million Records Project" report, a study which provides a baseline on Veteran student success. Overall, SVA found that Veterans have an education completion rate of 52 percent, which is much higher than

non-Veteran, non-traditional students who have a completion rate of 23 to 30 percent based on previous studies. Non-traditional students are defined as individuals who do not go into postsecondary education directly from high school; are financially independent; have dependents; are enrolled part-time; and are working full-time while attending school, among other criteria. These characteristics are shared by the majority of our Veteran students. SVA also highlighted the fact that approximately 9 out of 10 Veterans initially earn degrees at the associate level or higher, with many Veterans going on to achieve higher levels of education. The results also indicated that a high percentage of Veterans are pursuing degrees in business, public service, health, science, and engineering.

The results of the study show that continued research on Veteran graduation rates is imperative. Prior to the “Million Records Project,” accurate data on Veterans’ academic outcomes has been nearly impossible to find, and the lack of data has caused confusion about Veteran success in the postsecondary education environment.

The current study provides one of the most widely scaled perspectives on Veterans’ academic achievement and provides an important baseline. The success of the public-private partnership between VA, SVA, and NSC provides a clear path forward for future data-sharing and analysis. VA will continue working with them to expand and refine the research on Veterans’ academic outcomes. Some of the future collaboration efforts being discussed include reviewing retention, persistence, and transfer rates, as well as adding data for subsequent academic years.

Conclusion

VA has worked with key stakeholders to ensure that Veterans are utilizing their education benefits efficiently and successfully. Through ongoing interagency cooperation and student outreach, VA will continue its efforts to ensure Veterans are informed consumers and schools meet their obligations in providing education and training to this Nation's "next greatest generation."

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the other Members of the Subcommittee may have.