

TESTIMONY OF



Presented By

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Before the

**House Veterans Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

Regarding

**H.R. 356; H.R. 832; H.R. 1994; H.R. 2133; H.R. 2275; H.R. 2344;
H.R. 2360; H.R. 2361; and a draft bill entitled, "To amend title 38,
United States Code, to make certain modifications and improvements
in the transfer of unused educational assistance benefits under the
Post 9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of
Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes."**

June 2, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Board of Directors, and members, I thank you for giving Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) the opportunity to testify today regarding pending legislation before the subcommittee.

H.R.356 Wounded Warrior Employment Improvement Act introduced by Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (NY-18), *this legislation directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and publish an action plan for improving the training and rehabilitation services and assistance provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for veterans with service-connected disabilities.*

Requires such plan to include:

- a comprehensive analysis of, and recommendations and a proposed implementation plan for remedying, workload management challenges at VA regional offices, including steps to reduce counselor case loads of veterans participating in a rehabilitation program;*
- a comprehensive analysis of the reasons for the disproportionately low percentage of veterans with service-connected disabilities who served in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, who opt to participate in a VA rehabilitation program relative to the percentage of such veterans who use their entitlement to VA educational assistance;*
- recommendations and a proposed implementation plan for encouraging more veterans with service-connected disabilities who served in the Armed Forces after September 11, 2001, to participate in VA rehabilitation programs; and*
- a national staff training program for vocational rehabilitation counselors, that includes the provision of training to assist counselors in understanding the very profound disorientation experienced by warriors because of their injury, training to assist counselors in working in partnership with veterans on individual rehabilitation plans, and training on post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions and on moderate to severe traumatic brain injury that is designed to improve the ability of such counselors to assist veterans with such conditions.*

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) strongly supports this bill that would help ensure that disabled veterans get the assistance they need to succeed in the job market. We owe our veterans more than “blood money” in the form of compensation for service connected wounds, injuries, illness, or other adverse medical condition or malady. We owe all veterans, particularly disabled and veterans of combat theater deployments, the help needed to be able to obtain and sustain meaningful work at a living wage. In fact, the very best readjustment program for disabled veterans is now and always has been a decent job.

HR 356 will provide that all the services needed to help the disabled veteran reach the point of being “job ready” will henceforth be organized in a more comprehensive and integrated manner. VVA would note that part of this continuum of care must begin by implementing a real “Disabled Transition Assistance Program” or DTAP. Various Federal entities have claimed that we have such a program for more than 25 years, yet there still is no such meaningful program that consistently reaches separating military personnel who have been in some way disabled.

VVA looks forward to working with this area of VA in a much more transparent way than has been the case in the last decade or so, and in a collegial manner to ensure that a real continuum of assistance is actually available to every veteran or survivor who is eligible.

H.R.832 Veterans Employment and Training Service Longitudinal Study Act of 2015, introduced by Representative Paul Cook (CA-8), this *legislation directs the Secretary of Labor to enter into a contract with a non-governmental entity to conduct a longitudinal study of a statistically valid sample of each of the following groups of individuals over a period of at least five years: (1) veterans who have received intensive job counseling, training, and placement services; (2) veterans who did not receive intensive services but who otherwise received services; and (3) veterans who did not seek or receive services.*

Requires the study to include the collection of specified information for each individual who participates in the study, including:

- *the average number of months served on active duty,*
- *the distribution of disability ratings,*

- *unemployment benefits received,*
- *the average number of months employed and average individual and household annual income,*
- *employment status,*
- *whether the individual believes that any service received helped the individual to become employed,*
- *use of educational assistance,*
- *participation in a vocational rehabilitation program,*
- *conditions of discharge or release from the Armed Forces, and*
- *demographic information.*

Directs the Secretary to submit annual reports on the outcomes of the study that include any information the Secretary determines is necessary to determine long-term outcomes of the individuals in such groups.

VVA favors enactment of HR 832. Anything that will provide useful information about what is actually happening in regard to assisting veterans to find work is helpful, whether that function is based at the Department of Labor or at the VA. I would suggest that there be an oversight group to look at how they are doing data collection, which includes outside experts and knowledgeable veterans' advocates as equal partners, to ensure that the longitudinal study is more informative and meaningful than the current reports from the Department of Labor. VVA would point out that the reports from VETS at Labor have in the last decade at times been more than three years late.

H.R.1994, VA Accountability Act of 2015, introduced by Representative Jeff Miller, (FL-1) *this legislation would amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the removal or demotion of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs based on performance or misconduct, and for other purposes.*

VVA supports 1994, there is no excuse for the dissembling and lack of accountability in so much of what happens at the VA. It is certainly better than it was a year ago, but there is a long way to go in regard to cleaning up that corporate culture to make it the kind of system it should become. VA must change so that it can be trusted to get the "biggest bang for the taxpayer's buck," **and** (most importantly) get the individual veteran the best care or service due, in a timely way. It can be cleaned up and the job done

right the first time, if there is the political will to hold people accountable for doing their job properly.

VVA does believe that more safeguards should be built in for “workers” due process as opposed to managers. That does not mean that a lower level worker can escape accountability for the quality and/or quantity of their work.

Furthermore, it is clear to VVA that those VA employees who voice unwelcome truths, and who have the courage to stand up for what is right and for the veterans served are still being harassed, punished, and their livelihoods, and general well being subjected to extreme duress. The President and the Secretary simply must take immediate and effective action to address this ongoing problem.

H.R.2133 - Servicemembers' Choice in Transition Act, introduced by Representative Bill Flores (TX-17), *this legislation would amend title 10, United States Code, to provide additional training opportunities under the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) to members of the Armed Forces who are being separated from active duty.*

This legislation may well be of help, but all of this effort will not mean anything unless and until the other services emulate the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and put the requirement that personnel who will be separating must be allowed to attend TAP in the Officer Evaluation Report requirements. (When the Commandant says “You will” it gets done.)

H.R. 2275 - Jobs for Veterans Act of 2015 introduced by Congressman Jeff Miller (FL-1), *this legislation would amend title 38, United States Code, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration and to improve employment services for veterans by consolidating various programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. VVA strongly H.R. 2275 moving this function to VA in a new fourth division of VA that deals solely with helping veterans become as independent as possible. For those of working age, this means helping them successfully enter the civilian workforce. While we will address this in greater detail next week, this is a crucial aspect of the budget and planning process.*

VVA has always held that the ability to obtain and sustain meaningful employment at a living wage is the absolute central event of the readjustment process. Adding additional resources and much greater accountability to the VA Vocational Rehabilitation process is essential if we as a nation are to meet our obligation to these Americans who have served their country so well, and have already sacrificed so much.

The creation of the Veterans Economic Opportunities Administration (VEOA) will be a significant in the right direction. Additionally, the Department of Veterans Affairs must renew and embrace a corporate culture that measures its vocational rehabilitation and educational programs and initiatives to determine whether and how much they contribute to the ability of veterans to obtain and sustain gainful employment at a living wage.

The VA moved in the right direction by creating the Office of Economic Opportunity. This administrative change, we believe, does not go far enough. Hence, VVA advocates the creation of a fourth entity within the VA.

The VEOA should be headed by an under secretary nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. This VEOA would consolidate within the VA various separate yet what should be coordinated and interrelated programs whose mission, in essence, is to enable veterans to achieve their piece of the American Dream.

The VEOA would consolidate the Vocational Rehabilitation Service, the Veterans Education Service, and an enhanced Center for Veterans Enterprise. It would grant functional control, if not the outright transfer the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) from the Department of Labor, as well as the DVOP (Disabled Veteran Outreach Program) and the LVER (Local Veterans Employment Representative) positions, which currently reside in state departments of labor.

The VEOA goes beyond an administrative action, and we will work with leadership on both sides of aisle and the Administration to achieve early enactment of HR 2275. VVA will also reach out to our colleagues to assist the Executive branch in correctly implementing the VEOA, and assist in creating a different corporate culture where the workforce does what is right by the veteran, but also where the expectation is that the veteran will

concentrate on his or her abilities, not their disabilities. The whole focus of VEOA should be, and must be, to help veterans focus on and achieve the highest degree of independence and autonomy possible.

H.R.2360 Career-Ready Student Veterans Act introduced by Representative Mark Takano (CA-41), *this legislation would amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the approval of certain programs of education for purposes of educational assistance provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.*

VVA generally favors enactment of this legislation insofar as it really leads to helping veterans acquire skills that can be of immediate use in securing a decent job. We do point out that VBA revoked authority for a veterans' Community Based Organization that has been in operation for 11 years to be eligible to receive GI Bill monies, as had been the case over the more than past two years. When pressed, VBA officials said that it did not matter that this program over that period had a 90% job placement rate for course graduates, VBA had to do what the VA Office of General Counsel said they must do. VVA notes that this is the very same office of General Counsel who has stood idly by while predatory institutions were stealing not only billions of tax payer dollars, but were also stealing the future of the young veterans who were being bilked and left with no credentials of any value nor any marketable skills.

We have heard a great deal in past years about “transformation.” Unless that transformation starts with the Office of General Counsel and its long term career employees, all the rest will wind up being merely froth.

H.R.2361 Work-Study for Student Veterans Act introduced by Representative Mark Takano (CA-41), *this legislation would Reauthorizes through June 30, 2020 (under current law, the authorization expires as of June 30, 2013) certain qualifying work-study activities for individuals receiving educational assistance through the Department of Veterans Affairs.*

“To amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain modifications and

improvements in the transfer of unused educational assistance benefits under the Post 9/11 Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes.”

VVA strongly favors enactment of HR 2361. The VA work study program not only helps student veterans with needed additional income, but, if properly implemented, can assist in accomplishing many tasks in the veterans’ community that are particularly suited for student veterans to perform. We have in mind activities like tutoring, assisting with basic communication skills, outreach to others in their cohort group, and the like.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Takano, I thank you for this opportunity for Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) to share our thoughts regarding this vital legislation being considered here today.

I will be happy to answer any questions you and your colleagues may have.

**VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
June 2, 2015**

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For Further Information, Contact:

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Richard F. Weidman

Richard F. “Rick” Weidman is Executive Director for Policy and Government Affairs on the National Staff of Vietnam Veterans of America. As such, he is the primary spokesperson for VVA in Washington. He served as a 1-A-O Army Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War, including service with Company C, 23rd Med, AMERICAL Division, located in I Corps of Vietnam in 1969.

Mr. Weidman was part of the staff of VVA from 1979 to 1987, serving variously as Membership Service Director, Agency Liaison, and Director of Government Relations. He left VVA to serve in the Administration of Governor Mario M. Cuomo as statewide director of veterans’ employment & training (State Veterans Programs Administrator) for the New York State Department of Labor.

He has served as Consultant on Legislative Affairs to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and served at various times on the VA Readjustment Advisory Committee, the Secretary of Labor’s Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment & Training, the President’s Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities - Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans, Advisory Committee on Veterans’ Entrepreneurship at the Small Business Administration, and numerous other advocacy posts. He currently serves as Chairman of the Task Force for Veterans’ Entrepreneurship, which has become the principal collective voice for veteran and disabled veteran small-business owners.

Mr. Weidman was an instructor and administrator at Johnson State College (Vermont) in the 1970s, where he was also active in community and veterans affairs. He attended Colgate University (B.A., 1967), and did graduate study at the University of Vermont.

He is married and has four children.