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**TESTIMONY OF**  
**MR. WILLIAM HUBBARD**  
**VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS**  
**STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**BEFORE THE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:**  
**"EXAMINING VA'S INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS THAT PROVIDE**  
**ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS"**

**NOVEMBER 3, 2015**



Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on “Examining VA’s Information Technology Systems that Provide Economic Opportunities for Veterans.” With over 1,200 chapters across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those most directly impacted by this subject this committee addresses.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research development seeking ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation, we place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country, nothing is more paramount than their success in school to prepare them for productive and impactful lives.

In this testimony, we will address the Veterans Employment Center (VEC) platform, and processing delays we saw as student veterans headed to school this fall. We look forward to working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and this committee on these issues.

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### **Veterans Employment Center Overview**

The VEC is the federal government’s most recent response to unemployment among veteran populations. The program is intended as a consolidated and authoritative online source to connect veterans and their families to employers, and is the result of the President’s Executive Order published in 2009, “Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government”.<sup>1</sup> This tool replaced a variety of other online mechanisms including the widely known “Hero 2 Hired” program, with the focus on creating a single platform for transition veterans.

There are multiple positive aspects of the VEC, which we would like to highlight. We applaud the intent to create a consolidated program. As many of our members have found, the will and interest to support our nation’s veterans is widespread. The challenge is often identifying and connecting with the right resources. With a unified tool, the goal of making use of a comprehensive tool becomes more accessible. Also, the demonstration of real and impactful public-private partnerships (PPPs) is worth considering. Of note, the VA has partnered with LinkedIn to make several related benefits available to veterans using the VEC platform. Overall, the potential of the VEC program and platform is one worth

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<sup>1</sup> Executive Order 13518, “Employment of Veterans in the Federal Government”, November, 2009, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2009-11-13/pdf/E9-27441.pdf>



pursuing. We hope to see the tool refined and for the VA to consider some of the areas we highlight for improvement below.

While we note the positives of the potential of the VEC, we maintain concerns over several aspects of the program's operation. Based on data from the VA, only 22,500 profiles exist within the platform currently. This represents a very minor percentage of the overall unemployed veteran population, and well under 1% of the overall veteran population at large. We hope to see user adoption addressed in the coming months; the number of veteran profiles on the site is the true incentive for employer participation in the platform. Similarly, we believe employer participation is hampered by the platform's interface, which is not as intuitive and user-friendly as we hope it will be in the future.

In addition to user adoption, it is clear that data tracking the outcomes of the VEC are not presently available. Since the tool is meant to connect veterans with employers, we would hope to see VA address the tracking of outcomes related to hires resulting from connections through the platform, and employee retention by the employers. We applaud the high volume of traffic to the site VA has noted, but don't see those visits equating to hiring. Additionally, the commitments by employers are to be praised, but note that these commitments do not always result in actual veteran hires.

Furthermore, discussions with potential site users demonstrated a desire to have a live coordinator or advisor to connect with. Since the platform operates online, the ability to interface with facilitating experts is no longer available, as it was in previous hiring programs. We believe the ability for advisors or coordinators to track and view cases of veterans under their support network would be a critical feature to consider. In one instance, transition coordinators at a Georgia military installation have their transitioning service members include a distinctive phrase on their resumes so they can be found within the system. While we are impressed with this unique work-around, we would hope to see a permanent solution to this issue.

Challenges also exist with the ability to audit the profiles of veterans who join the platform. While the site can be accessed through the eBenefits portal, there are also ways to access the site with no required verification. This ability to access the site denigrates the assurance that profiles on the site are legitimate job-seekers. In other instances, veterans have noted the inability to save their profile until it's fully completed. We believe it would be beneficial to establish an automatically-saving profile to prevent loss of materials. In the process of conducting research with stakeholders, we determined that it might be worthwhile to provide more information on the funding mechanisms powering the platform, as well as the support to the tool. In the process of reviewing the VEC, there were some questions we believe merit further discussion, listed below:

- Do site visit numbers include Transition Assistance Program (TAP)-directed visits? Are "unique visits" unrelated to TAP distinguished somehow?



- How many hires have come as result of VEC?
- What is the median and mean timeframe for veterans to receive employment from sign-up to employment?
- How are job commitments by employers being translated into local jobs for veterans through VEC?
- What kind of auditing is done on employer and participant profiles?
- What is the funding stream for VEC?
- How much money has been spent on VEC?
- What is the projection of spending on VEC?
- What is the long-term plan for VEC?
- Should VEC be housed under the Department of Labor as the subject matter expert? If not, why not?

We are highly appreciative of VA's commitment to supporting veterans in multiple aspects of their lives. The VA has demonstrated the will and commitment we believe is required to serve our veterans properly. We hope to see this will translated into future updates to the VEC, so the intent and mission of the program is fully achieved. We look forward to continuing the discussion with VA and this committee on this program, and working towards its success.

### **Processing Issues**

This fall semester highlighted several challenges that directly impacted student veterans. In early to mid-September, it became increasingly clear that many student veterans were experiencing significant delays in the processing of their GI Bill benefits. We heard comments from student veterans like, "We just cannot figure out why enrollment forms keep getting lost" and, "Unfortunately, it is affecting many veterans who rely on that for rent. These are veterans who were certified before even July." Much speculation among the student veteran population ensued, and we appreciated VA's commitment to responding in a timely manner. Within days of SVA highlighting the issue, VA presented clear and user-friendly information directly to the student population through social media avenues (See annex).

Unfortunately, the hundreds of comments VA received over just a few days after posting the statement made it clear that the delays were causing a significant ripple across campuses nationwide. Part of this backlog of delayed processing could be attributed to miscommunications. One student veteran noted:



“Before I joined SVA, I came right off deployment and started using what was left of my GI Bill. I enrolled as soon as I could and still had massive delays. I would contact the VA and they said they wouldn't have my certifying info. I'd go back to the registrar's office and they would say they sent it. Then I would go back to the VA and they said no they didn't have it. Come to find out somehow they would mix up my SSN with some other number. Well, the VA didn't enquire if something sent was incorrect and the university VA office would assume what they sent was correct. They weren't communicating at all. Their process in certifying students wasn't helping either.”

However, a more systematic issue could be attributed to the delays. Another student shared, “Part of the backlog is due to overtime not being allowed sooner because they were diverting overtime resources to the disability claims process, and then finally allowed overtime later than usual for education claims.” This message was consistent with what VA staff discussed with SVA prior to the semester. VA staff specifically requested to know if student veterans within SVA chapters were seeing delays so they could be addressed readily. We are appreciative of VA's responsiveness, and feel that communicating that message earlier might have helped to avoid some confusion.

Ultimately, the core challenge remains VA's reliance on overtime hours for full-time employees during the peak periods of fall and spring enrollment. We agree that hiring seasonal staff to address these spikes would be both uncommon as well as costly. At the core of it, one student veteran highlighted the issue well, noting, “The biggest issue is managing throughout at both the school and the VA. There are not enough people managing such a manual-labor intensive job, and to do everything required for compliance, it is next to impossible, especially when you have larger populations changing schedules.”

### **Potential Processing Solution**

The issues of labor, compliance, and timeliness may all be addressed by a potential solution through one of our mutual partners, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). As a partner of both VA and SVA on the *Million Records Project (MRP)*, NSC demonstrated a high level of professionalism and ability during the MRP, traits which make them an ideal partner in any project. NSC presently works with the Department of Education (ED) on processing and reporting Title IV funds, including Direct Subsidized/Unsubsidized Loans, Direct Graduate PLUS Loans, Direct PLUS Loans, Federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG), and Federal Perkins Loans. Their data collection capabilities are not limited to student loans, however.

A partnership with NSC would facilitate the data exchange between IHLs and VA for certifications, recertifications, status changes and completion data. In practical terms, the NSC would act as a consolidation warehouse where data could be vetted and instantly sent to VA without requiring any additional steps. As an analogy, consider that when Americans pay their taxes, many choose to pay a tax accountant to prepare the forms, which allows them to avoid mistakes while gaining from the



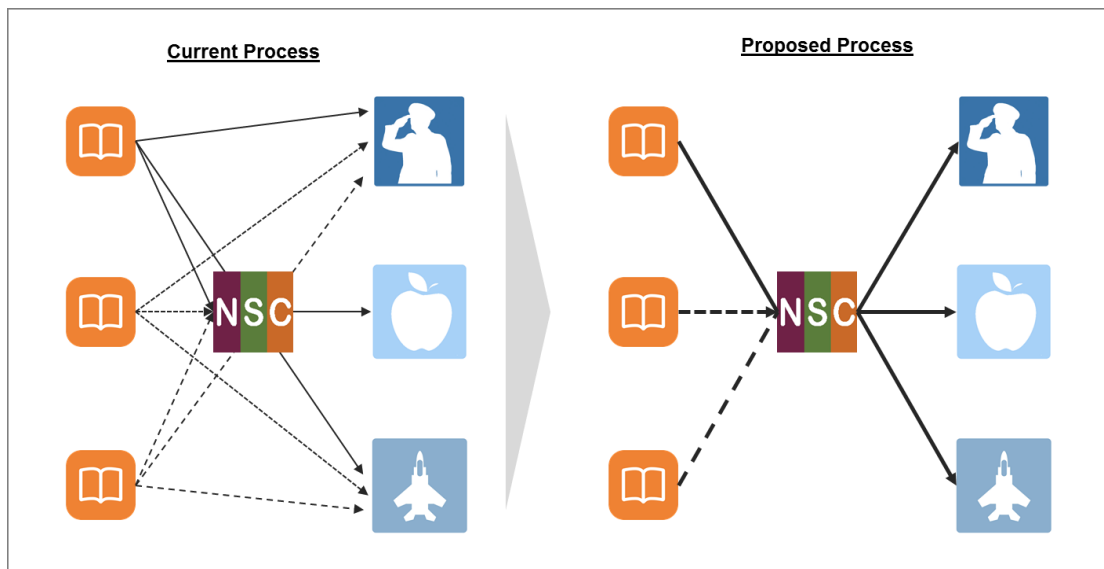
expertise of someone who knows how to ensure compliance. Similarly, NSC would act in the capacity as a tax accountant does, allowing the school to have peace of mind that their data is being properly filed, while giving VA the benefit of having pre-screened and fully-compliant data submissions.

Since VA and ED would be collecting data through a centralized source, the requirement for schools to submit redundant data is negated; most student data is standard, while only a small percentage is unique to any department or agency which is easily accounted for and sorted through NSC. NSC presently has access to the student full enrollment profile, not only students with Title IV loans, for over 97% of all students in higher education.

Under this proposal, VA and taxpayers incur no additional cost since schools select to send the data through NSC, paying for the cost of the service, while VA benefits from streamlined data submissions and research capabilities in conjunction with ED data. The ability to have real time measurement of completions and program efficacy would be a major benefit to VA and the broader research community; this is essential given the lack of available data outside of the *MRP*.

The benefits of this proposal are clear: accelerated data submissions, fewer errors, increased compliance, and advanced research to benefit student veterans. It is our hope that we can work with VA and NSC to bring this concept from possibility to reality. For a clear visual demonstration of what a partnership with VA, ED, and DoD would look like, see Figure 1 below. We believe that a process transformation would enable student veterans to get into the classroom with certification or processing issues presenting fewer challenges.

Figure 1. Process Comparison





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We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Subcommittee Members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and the entire Congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.



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

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2015, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.





## **William Hubbard, Vice President of Government Affairs**



Will Hubbard is on the professional staff of Student Veterans of America, currently serving as their Vice President of Government Affairs. His focus is on legislative action and executive branch policy across all issues that impact student veterans in higher education.

Mr. Hubbard is frequently called before congress as a subject matter expert to testify on a variety of issues, and often advises executive officials in the administration on higher education and veterans policy issues.

Previously, he was a National Executive Committee Member of Deloitte's Armed Forces Business Resource Group, and led the successful proposal of several veteran-focused projects while serving in the federal practice as part of Deloitte's Strategy and Operations business line.

Mr. Hubbard entered the Marine Corps in 2006, and initially served with 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines. He later went on to lead Marines with 4th Supply Company at Boling Air Force Base in Washington, DC. Today, he continues to serve in the Marine Corps Reserves based out of MCB Quantico, VA.

He has been a leader with Student Veterans of America at both the chapter and national levels, and has been passionate about veterans health issues since entering the armed services. Mr. Hubbard is a graduate of American University, where he studied International Relations. He currently resides in Arlington, VA with his wife and long-haired dachshund.