



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE APPROVING
AGENCIES**

On

Pending Education Benefits Legislation

2nd Session, 115th Congress

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

March 20, 2018

**STATEMENT OF DR. JOSEPH WESCOTT
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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES
FOR THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
CONCERNING
PENDING LEGISLATION
March 20, 2018**

CHAIRMAN ARRINGTON, RANKING MEMBER O’ROURKE, and Members of the Committee, the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) is pleased to provide its views on certain education benefits legislation under consideration by the Committee today, March 20, 2018.

NASAA does not receive any grants or contracts directly from the federal government, though its member organizations are state agencies operating in whole or in part under federal contracts funded by Congress and administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

On behalf of fifty-one State approving agencies (SAAs), including the territory of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, NASAA thanks the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity for its strong commitment to a better future for all service members, veterans and their families through its continued support of the GI Bill® educational program.

H. R. 1206, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to include the cost of applying to an institution of higher learning as part of the benefits provided under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program.

State approving agencies recognize that the costs of higher education continue to rise, and those costs include the fee required to apply to an institution of higher learning. Certainly, we believe that barriers to veterans’ application and entrance into college should be removed or mitigated whenever possible. As such, we agree that the cost of application to an institution, capped at \$750 so as to protect veterans and taxpayers from providers who might take advantage of this provision, should be payable under the GI Bill.

NASAA supports this bill.

H. R. 3023, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to eliminate the authority of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to pay reporting fees to educational institutions.

State approving agencies take seriously our role as “the gatekeepers of quality” and the “boots on the ground” defending the integrity of the GI Bill. We are committed to making sure that only quality programs are approved and we do so by carefully evaluating facilities and curriculum while simultaneously applying federal and state law and regulation. An additional and equally

important role is the continued oversight of these programs after their initial approval. We do so in conjunction with other stakeholders in veteran organizations and higher education, including state licensing agencies, state higher education departments, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Education and national and regional accrediting agencies.

We also seek to encourage our approved institutions to provide resources and policies, which will help guarantee the success of our veteran students once they enroll in a SAA approved program. Congress, in establishing laws and regulations governing the manner and method by which education could be approved for veterans, has wisely provided that the States, through their State approving agencies, are best situated and staffed to evaluate and oversee educational programming being considered for approval and being continued for GI Bill payment. State approving agencies and the VA have long recognized the costs affiliated with administering the GI Bill at institutions. While institutions, as well as veterans, have benefited from increases in the amounts paid, there have also been marked increases in the amount of work and difficulty of tasks required of school certifying officials (SCO). To illustrate the amount of work involved, the current SCO Handbook, published by the VA to provide detailed instructions to school certifying officials, is 138 pages in length. This publication is revised as needed, often twice a year and SCOs are expected to be proficient in all areas and requirements. It is not inappropriate, given the increasing complexity and number of certifications and reports, which VA requires of schools to administer the GI Bill at their institutions, for the VA to reimburse a small portion of these expenses through reporting fees. Schools receive \$16 for each student certified at their institution and recent legislation (PL 111-3779, section 304) mandates that this money be in a separate account and only be used for the benefit of student veterans. State approving agencies, as a part of their oversight duties and responsibilities, ensure that these monies are being used appropriately. Reporting fees are often used at schools for the training of SCOs and to offset the added administrative cost of certification. Frequently, this money is also used to purchase needed equipment for veterans' resource centers, veteran's graduation cords, and other resources to recognize and support the success of our veterans and their families.

NASAA opposes this bill.

H. R. 3940, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for housing stipends and supply fee payments under the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program for individuals affected by extended school closures due to disasters.

The upheaval to a student veteran and their family during a disaster can be horrendous and life altering. Recent examples of hurricane ravaged regions such as Puerto Rico and certain areas of Texas illustrate the need to allow a student veteran the opportunity to access a limited amount of educational assistance during such a traumatic time. Assistance at such times of transition can be key to the student being able to continue their studies or at least be prepared to do so when institutions return to some degree of normalcy.

NASAA supports this bill.

H. R. 4830, a bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the disapproval of any course of education for purposes of the educational assistance programs of the Department

of Veterans Affairs unless the educational institution providing the course permits individuals to attend or participate in courses pending payment by Department, and for other purposes.

As mentioned earlier, State approving agencies seek to encourage our approved institutions to provide resources and policies, which will help guarantee the success of our veteran students once they enroll in an SAA approved program. As such, we do not consider it inappropriate for Congress to consider establishing, as a part of requirements for approval, that educational institutions grant veterans a set period of time during which they are protected from being unenrolled or charged additional fees or required to take out loans while they are awaiting payment from the VA of their benefits. Given the many improvements found in PL 115-48, which the VA is required to implement in the coming days, it would be understandable if there were further delays in the payment of educational benefits. We do agree that this protection need only extend to veteran students, primarily chapter 33, whose tuition and fees are paid by the VA directly to the schools.

Given the fact that many leading institutions of education, particularly accredited public institutions of higher learning (IHLs), are already offering this protection to student veterans, we do not think it unreasonable to require that all approved educational institutions provide it to the students on their campus as well. In addition, though some might argue that in their state this has not been a problem, there are states wherein veteran students have faced penalty for late payment of benefits. Regardless, when we are discussing one of our nation's greatest treasures and trusts, the families of the fallen, even one incident is one too many.

NASAA supports this bill.

Today, SAAs throughout our nation, composed of approximately 218 professional and support personnel, are supervising over 10,000 active facilities with over 100,000 programs. We pledge to you that we will not fail in our critical mission and in our commitment to safeguard the public trust, to protect the GI Bill and to defend the future of those who have so nobly defended us. Mr. Chairman, NASAA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to share our concerns and suggestions and we commit to working together with you and your staff to enhance the pending legislation.

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Joseph W. Wescott II (Joe) was appointed Legislative Director of the National Association of State Approving Agencies in August 2015. Previously, he served four years as NASAA President and Vice President, while simultaneously working on the NASAA Legislative Committee. Wescott was appointed Executive Director of the North Carolina State Approving Agency (NCSAA) in Raleigh North Carolina on September 14, 2009 by the UNC System Board of Governors, at the recommendation of then system president Erskine Bowles. The fourth Executive Director since the agency was established in 1947; Dr. Wescott had previously served three years as an agency program specialist. As Executive Director, he oversees over 500 institutions of higher education and training throughout North Carolina ensuring quality educational programming and job training for veterans and their eligible dependents.

Prior to his appointment, Wescott served in various leadership roles in higher education including director of the office of Planning, Policy and Evaluation at Brunswick Community College, federal relations analyst/government relations representative for Duke University and an adjunct instructor at several colleges and professional organizations. Dr. Wescott is a veteran, having served on active duty as a combat officer in the US Army. Earlier, he attended Wake Forest University on a four-year Army ROTC scholarship, graduating with honors. He holds advanced degrees from Wake Forest University and North Carolina State University, including the doctorate in Higher Education Administration. In addition to other duties, Wescott serves as an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Leadership, Policy, Adult and Higher Education at NC State University. He serves on numerous national boards and state committees, including the NASAA Executive Board, NC Proprietary Schools Advisory Board, and the Governor's Working Group on Veterans, Service Members and their Families.

Dr. Wescott resides in Raleigh, NC and has written several articles and books on veteran's education, history and higher education topics including the history of the North Carolina Community College system.