

STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

FOR THE RECORD

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

“A Review of VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

May 17, 2018

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O’Rourke and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on this important benefit.

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service (VR&E) provides critical counseling and other adjunct services necessary to enable service-disabled veterans to overcome barriers as they prepare for, find, and maintain gainful employment. VR&E offers services on five tracks: re-employment, rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through long-term services, and independent living.

The VFW views VR&E as a critical tool in promoting success for our veterans. It is at the forefront in ensuring veterans can remain in the workforce and stay employed in meaningful careers. Once a veteran receives a disability rating, and cannot continue along their original path in the work force, they must choose a different route for their career. This is where VR&E is critical because it helps veterans remain employed by providing training and education for an alternative career.

The VFW has nearly 2,000 service officers across the country, and representatives on 24 military installations. Our service officers train twice a year on VR&E and have assisted on over 4,000 of those claims resulting in \$37.6 million in 2017 alone. We are fully supportive of how vitally important this program is, but we are also keenly aware of areas that need improvement.

The vital part of the VR&E program is the counselors who assist veterans with their claims. The counselors are the key component in assisting veterans with their rehabilitation plan for VR&E. However, while the counselors are one of the biggest assets for veterans seeking to use VR&E they are also one of the largest areas that needs improvement.

Far too often our service officers have to work with veterans who are eligible to receive VR&E benefits but were originally denied by the VR&E counselors. The subjectivity of approving eligibility leads to veterans being denied the benefit, when in fact they should have been approved immediately. There needs to be a more standardized way to approve the eligibility of veterans, and further training of counselors, so deserving recipients do not have to fight for a benefit they have already earned.

The other issue concerning VR&E counselors is the need for more of them. Additional funding needs to be authorized in order to ensure the program can keep up with demand. Counselors who have an increased workload cannot give the proper attention to the clients they deserve if counselors have too many clients to serve.

Over the past four years, program participation has increased by an estimated 16.8 percent, while VR&E staffing has risen just 1.8 percent. VA projects program participation will increase another 3.1 percent in FY 2019, and it is critical that sufficient resources are provided not only to meet this rising workload, but also to expand capacity to meet the full, unconstrained demand for VR&E services.

In 2016, Congress enacted legislation (P.L. 114–223) that included a provision recognizing the need to provide a sufficient client-to-counselor ratio to appropriately align veteran demand for VR&E services. Section 254 of that law authorizes the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to use appropriated funds to ensure the ratio of veterans to Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) does not exceed 125 veterans to one full-time employment equivalent. Unfortunately, for the past three years, VA has requested no new personnel for VR&E to reach this ratio.

In order to achieve the 1:125 counselor-to-client ratio established by Congress, the VFW estimates that VR&E will need another 163 Full Time Equivalent Employees (FTEE) in FY 2019 for a total workforce of 1,585, to manage an active caseload and provide support services to almost 150,000 VR&E participants. At a minimum, three-quarters of the new hires should be VRCs dedicated to providing direct services to veterans.

A suggestion the VFW has that could improve the accuracy of reporting the counselor-to-client ratio is to change from a national average to an average of VA Regional Offices (RO). This change would help identify areas of need for the specific offices, rather than having one area of the country drastically affect the average of the other RO's. Changing the reporting of the counselor-to-client ratio would help identify offices that are meeting the requirements and those offices that need significant help.

We are disappointed by the Administration's proposal for a decrease of \$257 million for VR&E for FY 2019. While we understand this is partly due to lower pricing for the Transition Assistance Program for those separating from service, this disregards the increased need of VR&E services veterans may require many years after separation. The Administration acknowledges that since 2013, participation in this program increased by 17 percent and noted a rolling average counselor-to-caseload ratio of 136.4; however, their budget request fails to request additional FTEE to move closer to a 1:125 counselor-to-client ratio.

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

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2018, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.