

The Honorable Julia Brownley
Testimony Before the House Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
May 23, 2018
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Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of my bill, H.R. 5452, the Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act.

I appreciate the Subcommittee's commitment to improving the VA's various veteran employment programs, including the Transition Assistance Program and the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. These programs provide the wraparound support, education, and services that help veterans get and keep meaningful work after their service. As a proud member of this Committee, and a co-chair of the Reinvesting in Our Returning Heroes Task Force, I share that same mission.

My bill today makes one simple but powerful change to the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (VR&E), also known as Chapter 31.

As you know, the VA currently runs the Chapter 31 program to help veterans obtain employment and achieve maximum independence through job training, employment accommodations, resume development, and job seeking skills coaching. In Fiscal Year 2016, nearly 30,000 veterans developed a new plan of service through Vocational Rehabilitation, and 11,500 veterans secured and maintained suitable employment, or completed an independent living program.

Eligibility for this program however, expires 12 years after separating from military service. Not all veterans with service-connected disabilities are aware of their possible eligibility when separating from their service. And some may not need VR&E until later in their career. According to DAV Resolution No. 250: "not all disabled veterans are under the impression that they need vocational rehabilitation until later, after the current 12-year rule excludes them from the benefit that they need and would otherwise have been entitled to."

The fact is, we need to address veteran unemployment at all ages, and ensure America's heroes have the support they need in the 21st Century economy. Currently 60% of unemployed veterans (more than 270,000 former servicemembers) are over the age of 45. Older veterans have outstanding experience and technical skills, and we need to do more to help these veterans succeed in the labor market. This unfair cap on Chapter 31 harms the ability of older veterans to access employment services.

The Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act would lift this arbitrary limit and ensure veterans get the support they have earned and deserve. Like the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (Caregiver Program), this arbitrary cap forces the VA to treat two veterans, who have the same service-connected disability, differently, simply because of how long ago they served. We worked in a bipartisan way to fix that unfairness in the Caregiver Program, and we should do the same with Chapter 31.

H.R. 5452 is supported by the VSOs as a common-sense solution to simplify the program and help get more veterans back to work. I thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this hearing, I look forward to working with you to advance this bill, and am happy to answer any questions.