

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

WITH RESPECT TO

"Pending Legislation"

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on these important pieces of legislation.

H.R. 5052, Wage Adjustment for Veterans Enrolled in School (WAVES) Act

Most of the feedback the VFW receives regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Work-Study program is centered around processing and timely payments. The VFW does not have a specific resolution regarding equitable VA Work-Study wages and state minimum wages, however, we would definitely not oppose a proposal such as this to increase the amount of money in the pockets of student veterans.

Stem Eligibility Extension

As part of the Forever GI Bill, the VFW strongly supported the provision to grant additional months of GI Bill eligibility for student veterans pursuing degrees in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). Our nation is making a push to encourage more students to pursue STEM degrees in order to be competitive and outpace other nations around the world. Student veterans should be at the forefront of this initiative. In order to make this a possibility, there needs to be some additional eligibility granted for those pursuing these degrees, because

STEM programs often take longer than the traditional four years to complete a bachelor's degree. The VFW wants to see student veterans succeed at the highest levels, and extending school eligibility in this case may be necessary to complete these highly important degrees.

The STEM provision when crafted was not perfect and needed some additional amendments since its enactment. The STEM fields identified as eligible were never meant to be a final list, because as time passes additional programs will be identified and added to the list. Medical residency and nursing residency programs are vitally important to help increase the number of health care professionals serving our country. Adding these programs to the STEM eligibility is a common-sense proposal that will ultimately add to our number of health care professionals.

VA Auto Grant

For years the VFW has had a resolution to amend VA's automobile grant for disabled veterans. The auto grant program is an incredibly valuable benefit that disabled veterans need to purchase or upgrade their vehicles. However, the grant is a one-time benefit and cannot be utilized again no matter how many vehicles a veteran may purchase. The VFW supports the proposals to increase the number of times the VA's auto grant program can be utilized by disabled veterans.

The average American replaces a car approximately every five years, and while these proposals seek to increase eligibility for once every ten years, the VFW feels these proposals are a step in the right direction. Ultimately, the VFW would like to see VA's auto grant program available for veterans to use for each new lease of a vehicle, or every five years, whichever comes first.

GI Bill Comparison Tool

The VFW is a strong supporter of the GI Bill comparison tool and supports this proposal to add information to this valuable platform. While the GI Bill comparison tool provides important information to students, and could always contain more information such as student loan debt and accurate graduation rates, but the tool itself needs a significant overhaul before it can be truly reliable. The current comparison tool and complaint system does not have the most up to date information about schools displayed. Old information and complaints exist on the tool and there is no formal process for removing negative information. Even if VA enters into multiple data-sharing agreements with other agencies, the GI Bill comparison tool will never be fully accurate unless there is a system in place to remove old data to ensure the current information is the most accurate. In order to do this, the VFW recommends a thorough review of the entire GI Bill comparison tool and a proposal drafted to overhaul the platform, with proper IT resources, in order to make it a living comparison tool that student veterans can rely on at all times.

Class Evaluation Act

Going back to school after military service may be a challenging task for many veterans for a variety of reasons. Student veterans may be juggling school responsibilities in combination with other demanding factors such as work, or families, and worrying about accurate VA payments is

a burden we should lift off their shoulders. The VFW supports this proposal to make a requirement related to the payment of VA money in order to standardize payment schedules, potentially lessen overpayments, and remove unnecessary worries of student veterans while they complete their educational endeavors. Simplifying the payment schedule from VA to schools and students is a smart step in rectifying VA payment issues.

Disaster Relief

The VFW supports the proposal to reduce the loan fees paid by veterans affected by major disasters. The VA Home Loan program is an incredibly valuable benefit utilized by millions of veterans during its 75-year history. The home loan program is an earned benefit for veterans, and it should not be diminished due to unforeseen natural disasters. Major disasters strike various areas of the country every year, devastating entire communities. A major hurdle in these communities is the effort of rebuilding, and allowing VA to wipe the loan fees slate clean for certain veterans affected by these disasters will help speed up the recovery process for these families, and hopefully help their surrounding communities. Allowing veterans who lost homes due to devastating natural disasters to revert fees back to the original home loan buyer level, as opposed to a subsequent buyer, is a small measure of relief for veterans in areas hit by disasters.

VA Certificates of Eligibility

The VFW has supported the proposal to make Certificates of Eligibility electronic for years. The option of having the certificate at a veteran's digital fingertips is an option that is long past due. If VA's IT systems cannot make this option a reality, then proper funding for a simple solution should be requested, authorized, and appropriated to make this common-sense fix for a 20th-century problem. Certificates of Eligibility for programs all across VA are requested by outside parties constantly, and an electronic solution is needed. There are certain VA forms that can be accessed through eBenefits, but then those forms need to be sent to various parties. Veterans should be able to log on and see all the benefits and programs to which they are entitled, not only Disability and Compensation eligibility.

Transferability Liability

GI Bill transferability often seems like a fairly straightforward option for service members, but occasionally a recipient of this incredible benefit gets caught up in unintended bureaucracy. The VFW agrees that the transfer recipient of the GI Bill should not be held financially liable if the original service member fails to fulfill his or her service obligation. Once discovered, the use of the benefit should cease, but the dependent should not be held accountable for repayment, as they were not the party who did not complete an obligation.

To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the treatment by the Department of Veterans Affairs of for-profit educational institutions converted to non-profit educational institutions.

The VFW feels this proposal could set up future conflicts between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Education. The VFW is concerned this could lead to unintended consequences if the two agencies intentionally set up different rules.

VET-TEC Improvements

The VFW supports all three proposals to make changes and improvements for the Veterans Affairs High Technology Education (VET-TEC) Pilot Program. Expanding VET-TEC eligibility for service members still on active duty but on terminal leave would hopefully decrease the number of veterans who face employment gaps after transitioning out of active service. Service members are allowed to participate in certain employment training while in the SkillBridge program before separation, and adding VET-TEC to their options should benefit those service members looking for careers in certain high technology fields.

The VFW supports the change regarding employment 180 days after VET-TEC completion for reserve component personnel only, if activations disrupt their paths to employment. However, the VFW does not want to see this as beginning to ease some of the requirements for the overall VET-TEC program. The entire pilot program is still very new, and we need to be careful that changes such as these are made only if they are absolutely necessary for the veterans or service members.

The VFW also supports the proposal to alter the requirements for VET-TEC students looking to participate in this program on a part-time basis. The VFW also sees this as an important proposal that opens up a larger discussion about veteran education and employment programs. Student veterans sometimes face challenges typical traditional students do not face while attending school. Large numbers of student veterans have families, are employed in some capacity, or are facing multiple other hurdles of adult life that may not be realized yet for a lot of traditional 18-22-year-old students. Student veterans are largely “non-traditional” students who tackle school in a different way, including their class schedule times.

We veterans’ advocates, along with our friends at VA and in Congress, have recognized that the student veteran is more often than not a non-traditional student, yet we keep building education and employment programs based on a traditional full-time model. Then, after research and discussion, these programs are altered to allow for non-traditional students to partake in these programs. Now is the time to look at all student veteran programs to begin the discussion about opening all of them to non-traditional students, particularly with an eye on part-time participation in programs. Any new programs should be built with at least non-traditional students in mind, and possibly with these students in the forefront.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Again, the VFW thanks you and the Ranking Member for the opportunity to testify on these important issues before this subcommittee. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.