

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.

March 10, 2020

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. 2224, Homeless Veterans with Children Reintegration Act

The VFW recognizes the need to support homeless veterans with dependents and understands the urgency of the childcare issue. The VFW would support this proposal to prioritize services to veterans with dependents, as long as those without dependents are not adversely affected. If a veteran is bumped up a priority list because of childcare, that would be acceptable as long as those without children are allowed to maintain their current position or status, and not be perpetually downgraded simply because they do not have dependents. Taking care of our homeless veterans is a mission we must take seriously, especially if there are children involved, and we feel there is an appropriate balance to be struck to make sure all veterans involved receive the services and care they need.

H.R. 5056, Modern GI Bill Act

The VFW opposes the proposal to use the GI Bill to repay preexisting student loans. There are multiple existing programs through the Department of Defense as recruiting tools to help service members discharge previous student loan debt. Programs like the Public Service Loan Forgiveness, Military College Loan Repayment Program (CLRP), CLRP for Reserves, National Defense Student Loan Discharge, and the Prior Service Soldier Loan Repayment Program are just some of the options for service members to discharge their previous federal student loans. The VFW has held the belief for years that the GI Bill should not be traded for any monetary value!

This does not, however, mean we are oblivious to certain service members who incur student loan debt while utilizing the GI Bill. Unfortunately, there are many student veterans using GI Bill benefits who find that program is just not enough. Examples of these could be student veterans who are not 100% eligible for the GI Bill, students whose schools do not provide Yellow Ribbon eligibility, or simply students who attend schools with high tuition rates such as flight schools. The VFW has proposed options such as accelerated payment schedules, or revising Yellow Ribbon eligibility for student veterans struggling to make the GI Bill cover all tuition and housing payments. The GI Bill should offer service members the opportunity to attain their post-military educational goals, without having to accrue debt. The VFW does not support this bill, but would support alternative ways to use excess eligibility to prevent student loan debt for veterans. As written, this bill treats the GI Bill as a benefit that can be cashed out.

H.R. 5324, Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act of 2019

The VFW supports this proposal to add friends and family members to a network of support to which the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) can send valuable information. Too often, important information regarding VA services or programs goes unnoticed by veterans who could benefit from those services or programs. Adding additional personnel to information networks should help to minimize that problem. It is deeply distressing to hear that any veteran slipped through the cracks because they did not know about care for which they were eligible. Hopefully, with this proposal there will be fewer of those unfortunate cases moving forward.

Amendment to H.R. 5687

The VFW supports this proposal to extend periods of coverage for student veterans during periods of school closure due to natural disasters. In recent years, natural disasters such as Hurricane Harvey have shut down entire regions for extended periods of time. The devastation brought by these natural disasters sometimes lasts longer than the four-week period originally allotted for temporary closures. The VFW supports this proposal to extend the closure period, because in the aftermath of some of these devastating forces of nature, student veterans should focus on their homes and families first, and worry about their tuition and housing payments later.

Draft Bill to Rename Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program

The VFW does not have a specific resolution regarding the renaming of the VR&E program to Vocational Readiness and Employment, but understands the argument for doing so. The VFW has, however, advocated for the increased advertisement and participation of the VR&E program, and if minor adjustments like a name change could help produce more participation, then the VFW would not oppose doing so in order to improve the overall program.

Draft Bill to Repay Members of the Armed Forces for Education Contributions

The VFW supports this proposal to repay men and women of the armed forces who made additional contributions toward their educational programs, but who never reap the reward. Many service members paid \$1,200 into the Montgomery GI Bill program, and many others paid another \$1,200 toward the "kicker" of that same program. Montgomery GI Bill usage is in the

single digits, meaning more than 90 percent of veterans do not use the program they paid toward, and very few of those veterans can recoup the money they paid. This proposal would allow veterans to recoup the additional money they paid into additional educational programs, so that money can be better utilized to enhance their lives in multitudes of different ways.

Draft Bill to Clarify the Location of Educational Institutions Exclusively for Distance Learning

The VFW supports the intent of this bill to help streamline the approval process for certain institutions. However, we caution against linking the institution's headquarters with the monthly housing stipend. In July, a proposal to increase the online-only housing payments was proposed, and the VFW cautioned against linking housing payments to headquarters locations. Once the final changes for the Forever GI Bill are implemented, housing stipends will be calculated based on the facility codes for each institution. This legislation would provide veterans who do not live in the area where the school is located to receive the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH). For example, this legislation would allow a veteran who lives in a rural area with a low cost of living to receive BAH for New York City, which has a high cost of living. This bill could lead to institutions with higher BAH rates targeting military members, veterans, and their families with the offer of more money rather than better instruction. Predatory institutions could set up locations in major cities with the intent of continuing deceptive practices with an offer of higher housing stipends.

Discussion Drafts for Improvements for Veterans in Tribal Areas

American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the military at a higher rate than members of other racial groups, and are more likely to lack health insurance or have a service-related disability. An unfortunate reality for too many of our brother and sister veterans living in tribal areas is they face difficulties such as unemployment, homelessness, and food insecurity at a higher rate than their counterparts living outside of tribal areas. The proposals to introduce a Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to better administer the tribal U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program is a common-sense solution to an unfortunate problem.

Additionally, a pilot program for tribal-specific VetSuccess counselors is an excellent way to bring this successful program to more campuses where it is needed. The VetSuccess program is on more than 100 college campuses and the positive feedback from those who have benefitted from this program is incredible. Employment and education are major issues in tribal areas and a VetSuccess on campus program would greatly benefit those veterans attending schools in tribal areas.

Discussion Draft to Expand the Yellow Ribbon Program

The Yellow Ribbon Program is an amazing program that allows hundreds of thousands of student veterans to help offset the costs of education. I was personally allowed to finish my degree with the help of the Yellow Ribbon Program, which covered the remainder of costs for

each semester. Yellow Ribbon helps lift the burden for student veterans and this program should be allowed at any institution that wishes to participate in the program. Due to a technical oversight, schools outside the United States cannot participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program. The VFW supports the proposal to expand eligibility to schools willing to participate in the program, but whose campuses are outside of the United States.

Draft Bill to Perform Consumer Testing of GI Bill Comparison Tool

The VFW is a strong supporter of the GI Bill comparison tool, and supports this proposal to perform consumer testing of the tool. While the GI Bill comparison tool provides important information for students, the tool itself needs a significant overhaul before it can be truly reliable. The existing comparison tool and complaint system does not have the most current 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. 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 the tool a living comparison tool that student veterans can rely on at all times. If the first step in the process to revamp the comparison tool is rigorous testing, then the VFW would gladly support that initial step.

Draft Bill to Authorize Reimbursement of Fees for Utilizing the Homeless Management Information System

The VFW supports this proposal to allow grant recipients to use some of the grant to offset the utilization fee. The collection of administrative fees is a necessary requirement across some VA programs, and allowing reimbursement of the fees for some grant recipients would align them with recipients of Supportive Services for Veteran Families grants as well.

Reducing Veteran Homeless Act of 2020

The VFW supports the *Reducing Veteran Homeless Act of 2020* in an effort to help reduce the number of homeless veterans across the country. The HUD-VASH program is an incredibly vital tool in keeping our veterans off the streets. A common complaint the VFW has heard is the workload for the current case managers is too burdensome. This proposal would help mitigate that issue of workload by clearing pathways for additional employment opportunities within the HUD-VASH management program.

The VFW urges Congress to make additional improvements to the HUD-VASH program. Veterans fortunate enough to obtain HUD-VA Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers also face difficulties. VFW service officers have reported in various cities that homeless veterans sometimes prefer sleeping under a bridge rather than living in the unsafe neighborhoods for which their vouchers are eligible. HUD-VASH vouchers must provide veterans the opportunity to live in safe and secure housing.

Draft Bill to Improve Skillbridge and Transition Assistance Program

The VFW understands the burden on the military's reserve component has increased exponentially since September 11, 2001. The traditional one weekend a month and two weeks a year model is long gone, and has been replaced with a much more rigorous operations tempo. Activations that take troops beyond a "satisfactory" year should be compensated, with eligibility and benefits on par with other troops serving on active duty. Multiple Annual Trainings, and more and more "four-day weekend" drills are taxing to the reserve component, and those members should be adequately compensated with eligibility toward education, medical coverage, and retirement.

The VFW supports the section of this provision to open up eligibility to the Skillbridge program to certain members of the reserve component. A major concern in total force readiness is unemployment and underemployment in the reserve component, and offering additional opportunities like participation in programs like Skillbridge can only help to mitigate those issues.

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.