

**The Enlisted Association  
Of the National Guard  
Of the United States**

**Statement for the Record**

**United States House  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

**On**

**Proposed Legislation**

**March 10, 2020**

***The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States***

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***Washington, D.C. 20001***

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The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States (EANGUS) was created in 1970 by a group of senior Non-Commissioned Officers. It was formally organized and incorporated in 1972 in Jackson, Mississippi, with the goal of increasing the voice of Enlisted persons in the National Guard on Capitol Hill for Enlisted National Guard issues. Beginning with twenty-three states, EANGUS now represents all 54 states and territories, with a constituency base of over 414,000, hundreds of thousands of family members, as well as thousands of retired members.

Headquartered and with offices in Washington, D.C., EANGUS is a long-time member of The Military Coalition (TMC) and is actively engaged with the Guard/Reserve Committee, the Health Care Committee, and the Veterans Committee. EANGUS often partners with other National Guard related associations such as the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS), the Adjutants General Association of the United States (AGAUS) and the Reserve Officers Association (ROA) to pursue common legislative goals and outcomes.

EANGUS is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to promoting the status, welfare and professionalism of Enlisted members of the National Guard by supporting legislation that creates adequate staffing, pay, benefits, entitlements, equipment and installations for the National Guard.

The legislative goals of EANGUS are published annually. The goals and objectives are established through the resolution process, with resolutions passed by association delegates at the annual conference. From these resolutions come the issues that EANGUS will pursue in Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

President - Command Sergeant Major (Ret) Karen Craig  
Executive Director - Sergeant Major (Ret) Frank Yoakum

## Executive Director Frank Yoakum



Sergeant Major Frank Yoakum, US Army (retired), is the Executive Director of the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States, a non-profit military service organization headquartered in Washington D.C. Organized in 1972, the Enlisted Association represents the interests of over a million National Guard members, their families, retirees, and surviving spouses to the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. He is the third full-time Executive Director of the Association. He became the Executive Director on February 29, 2016.

Sergeant Major Yoakum began his Army career during the period of conscription, and spent thirty-one years on active duty in a variety of assignments in the active Army and Army National Guard, culminating in March 2006 while serving as the sole Congressional Legislative Liaison NCO in the entire Army, on the personal staff of the Chief National Guard Bureau. His active duty service included postings to Alaska, Arizona, California, Georgia, Guam, Kansas, Maryland, and Virginia. For his long and honorable service, he was awarded the Legion of Merit—Legionnaire.

Since retiring, Yoakum has worked as a DOD contractor in transition assistance, personal finance education, and compensation fraud. He also served in the Technician Personnel Division at National Guard Bureau just prior to his selection as Executive Director.

Yoakum is married to his bride of over thirty-seven years, Norie, and has five adult children and eleven grandchildren. He resides in Forest Hill Maryland and Alexandria Virginia. He holds the Artillery Association's Honorable Order of Saint Barbara and Ordnance Corps' Order of Samuel Sharpe. He is a life member of the Enlisted Association and a life member of the Wyoming National Guard Association. He is also an adult Bible study teacher at his church.

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States and the men and women of the National Guard still serving or retired, we thank you for this opportunity to share the views of EANGUS on pending legislation to reform and improve educational assistance and programs that provide members of the National Guard and veterans educational opportunities that would otherwise remain an impossibility. The significance of these education benefits, programs and informational resources to servicemembers cannot be estimated too highly, and we thank you for your dedication to preserve and improve these benefits.

### **HR 5056 – “Modern GI Bill Act”**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to allow individuals who are entitled to Post-9/11 educational assistance to use such assistance to repay Federal student loans.*

Since the inception of the Servicemember Readjustment Act in 1944, which has come to be known as the first GI Bill, and throughout its many iterations, adequate benefits have made it possible for veterans and those currently serving to transition into society and thrive. GI Bill benefits have made it possible for generations of veterans and their families to pursue educational opportunities when they otherwise could not, empowering them to succeed in growing their careers, provide for their families, and give back to their communities.

In essence, the GI Bill is a “readjustment” benefit for veterans transitioning into civilian life, since it is recognized that education is one of the most powerful means of an individual to orient themselves in society towards a goal that will enhance their personal and professional lives. That the GI Bill can be transferred to a servicemember’s or veteran’s family is in the spirit of this benefit and is a natural augmentation, further providing educational possibilities to veterans that would otherwise not be possible.

The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States has strong reservations, however, of using GI Bill funds to repay loans for an education already achieved. We are sympathetic to the principle driving this legislation—which is that the GI Bill is something *earned* through service and sacrifice, and veterans ought to be able to use their GI Bill in the way they determine best—but do not wish to compromise available funding for educational assistance in the service of Federal loan repayments. The Department of Defense has multiple student loan assistance programs for servicemembers, such as the Army Student Loan Repayment Program; and, the Military College Loan Repayment Program is specifically designed as a loan forgiveness program for those with college debt considering service in either Active Duty or the Reserve Component.

Regardless of whether the servicemember or veteran has taken advantage of their prior educational accomplishments to attain a career and is capable of repaying their loans, funding for educational assistance ought to be reserved to achieving its essential goal: to provide educational opportunities to servicemembers, veterans and their families that make possible new professional and personal achievement. This legislation, however, is attempting to help veterans manage their student loan debt, because programs available to veterans are either lacking, or in need of substantial reformation. Continued efforts must be made to construct, reform and fund veteran student loan forgiveness programs while safeguarding the funds for those who have yet had the opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard has strong concerns of HR 5056 as currently written.**

## **HR 5324 – “Sergeant Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act of 2019”**

*To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program on information sharing between the Department of Veterans Affairs and designated relatives and friends of veterans regarding the assistance and benefits available to the veterans, and for other purposes.*

The sheer number of programs, procedures, and nuances that veterans must understand upon separation from the Armed Forces is daunting, and while the Transition Assistance Program has made progress in attempting to educate transitioning servicemembers on their obligations and the procedures to follow in order to take advantage of their benefits, it is still too common that veterans leave DOD systems without ever transitioning into VA programs. There are many reasons for this lack of continuity, and not least of them is the overwhelming burden veterans face during transition to adjust to civilian life, plan for their future and reintegrate into their communities. It is not easily managed alone.

Empowering a veteran’s community to share part of this burden via self-selected support networks is a good step forward to ensuring that veterans enroll in VA programs and do not isolate themselves. The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States believes these support networks will improve the rate of use of VA programs among transitioning veterans, whose peer networks will be equipped to encourage veteran participation in these programs designed to alleviate the burden of transition; increase awareness of trusted community support programs for veterans; and, encourage and normalize dialogue between veterans and their communities about the experiences and struggles veterans face.

The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States further sees the opportunity within this pilot program to disseminate critical information to veterans’ families and friends on suicide prevention, on additional ways to support transitioning veterans, and to promote general education among participating support network members on difficulties veterans face during transition. This is particularly critical for members of the Reserve Component, who either lack access to VA mental health services due to geographical limitations, or because they do not rate as a “veteran” as currently defined in statute. We recommend, therefore, that this pilot program focus its efforts in one state with a large National Guard population over the period of five years, which is statistically the period in which a veteran is most at-risk to fall victim to suicide.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of HR 5324.**

## **HR – “**Educational Assistance, TAP, Skillbridge**”**

*To amend titles 38 and 10, United States Code, to make certain improvements to educational assistance administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and to the Transition Assistance Program and Skillbridge program of the Department of Defense.*

The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States strongly believes that Every Day in Uniform Counts, and that members of the National Guard have faced parity issues in eligibility for benefits for too long. Bringing members of the National Guard to parity with the rest of the Armed Forces is a matter of national security in the age of Guard 4.0, which has accelerated deployment tempo and increased the training commitments and duty requirements of members of the National Guard without also ensuring these servicemembers have equal opportunity for federal benefits to match their service commitments. The present state of things leaves little doubt that enrollment and retention within the National Guard will suffer as a result.

This legislation brings commonsense reform to Title 38 and secures parity for members of the National Guard by modernizing eligibility for Post 9/11 GI Bill education assistance. The inclusion of Title 32 § 101(12) is a substantial advance in parity for members of the National Guard, who are currently disadvantaged compared to members of the Reserve Component and Active Duty in the accumulation of GI Bill benefits. Members of the National Guard are attending the same service schools, performing similar or the same training as their peers, yet have remained ineligible to qualify for educational assistance while performing their duty. The further addition of duty statuses particular to the National Guard, such as Title 32 § 502, along with considerations of the various types of pay eligibilities for duty particular to the National Guard, exemplifies this legislation’s commitment to capture the full scope of service of National Guard servicemembers, and The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States applauds this legislation’s reformation of eligibility criteria for educational assistance.

Furthermore, members of the National Guard are not explicitly eligible to participate in DOD’s employment assistance program, Skillbridge; and, each Service has their own eligibility requirements for members of the National Guard. But, this innovative program provides servicemembers with the opportunity to gain experience and develop skills in desirable career fields with trusted industry partners, while growing the servicemember’s professional network to increase the rate of job placement. The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is thankful that this legislation includes the Reserve Component into the Skillbridge program, while also ensuring that the servicemember is able to complete their Skillbridge program completely once enrolled.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of this draft legislation *as written.***

## **HR – “GI Bill Comparison Tool Consumer Testing”**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct consumer testing to improve the internet website of the Department of Veterans Affairs that provides individuals with postsecondary education information.*

The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States has long advocated for the modernization and improvement of the GI Bill Comparison Tool, which does not currently provide information about veteran student outcomes at institutions of higher education—only aggregated data of the overall student outcomes for an institution. Further, the Comparison Tool lags behind the Department of Education’s College Scorecard in ease of use and accessibility, often displaying outdated information about an institution that does not match with College Scorecard—even though the information displayed on the GI Bill Comparison Tool is from the Department of Education.

It is essential that accurate information is easily accessible to veterans through the GI Bill Comparison Tool, which is meant to be a trusted resource to help veterans determine which institution and program will best ensure they achieve their educational and occupational goals. We are happy to see that this legislation recognizes the need to reform the GI Bill Comparison Tool with improved accessibility via consumer testing, and invites stakeholder input to recommend additional information that would improve the effectiveness of the GI Bill Comparison Tool. That being said, the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States has previously recommended that the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Education partner to establish more robust data sharing between the agencies. This partnership would not only make the GI Bill Comparison Tool relevant to veteran students in the modern day, but would provide for the calculation of the return on investment (ROI) of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

As the Department of Education moves towards programmatic level data, updating the GI Bill Comparison Tool is essential to ensure that veteran students are given veteran-specific outcomes to be at parity with the information given to nonveteran students. Without this necessary improvement, veterans might enroll in programs that have low veteran student success rates and low ROI for a specific degree pathway, despite having high institutional outcomes in general. In turn, many veterans will continue to invest precious time and scarce taxpayer dollars in the pursuit of a degree or credential that will not produce desired results.

Better data could be used immediately to improve the GI Bill Comparison Tool and calculate the ROI of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, without VA having to obtain all the necessary data-sharing agreements themselves.<sup>1</sup> At present, the Department of Education’s College Scorecard displays a range of student outcomes, like the average salary of an institution’s graduates, since it is linked with IRS data, or debt data derived from the office of Federal Student Aid. The Scorecard is currently on track to begin presenting student outcome data at the even more meaningful programmatic level. If the Department of Veterans Affairs agrees to share its data with The Department of Education, it will be possible for the GI Bill Comparison Tool to disaggregate veteran student outcomes down to the programmatic level, calculate the ROI of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, creating an improved GI Bill Comparison Tool for all veteran students. This will provide the transparency veteran students deserve when deciding where and how to invest their GI Bill benefits, further enhancing the ROI of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and provide additional oversight over GI Bill eligible institutions of higher education.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of this draft legislation *as written.***

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<sup>1</sup> This data sharing is already established in 20 U.S. Code § 1015, which directs the Commissioner of Education Statistics to: develop a uniform methodology of reporting postsecondary spending, design systems capable of receiving and analyzing data from other federal agencies, disseminate data to stakeholders, and work with the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to collect, study, and disseminate information on financial aid and education benefits.

## **HR – “Distance Learning Provider Location”**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the location of an educational institution conducting programs of education exclusively by distance learning for purposes of the Department of Veterans Affairs approval process.*

Current data<sup>2</sup> indicates that over one third of all servicemembers and veterans enroll in distance learning programs for their undergraduate studies, and of those pursuing graduate studies, over 40 percent enroll in distance learning programs. They outpace their nonmilitary counterparts in enrollment in distance learning programs, and this growing market of postsecondary education has made it possible for more veteran students than ever before to accomplish their educational goals while caring for their families and sustaining their careers. It is self-evident that, from a veteran student perspective, the location of an institution is irrelevant to the distance learning program they enroll in. But complications arise from the State and Federal perspective that have effects on veteran students, such as whether the veteran will be considered an in-state or out-of-state student, or whether the distance learning provider is approved in the veteran student’s home state. It is from this perspective that interstate cooperation is necessary, and such advances have been made by the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA). There is still much more progress that can be made in the recognition, regulation and approval of distance learning programs, and how providers, States and the Federal government work together for veteran students.

Case in point: in the advancement of distance learning programs, complications have arisen between state approving agencies, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and institutions that conduct exclusively online programs. Clarification has been needed on policy guidelines to identify the location of institutions of higher education that provide exclusively distance learning programs for the purposes of state approval. Codifying clear guidelines of residence will provide better oversight, transparency, and resolve confusion for institutions and approval agencies alike.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of this draft legislation *as written.***

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<sup>2</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011163.pdf>



## **HR \_\_\_ – “Vocational Readiness and Employment Program”**

*To rename the Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation Program as the Vocational Readiness and Employment Program, and for other purposes.*

We appreciate that this legislation agrees with the Enlisted Association of the National Guard in saying that “veterans are not broken.” It is paramount that we not permit this discouraging mindset to be reinforced with poor language, particularly in the titles of Federal programs, which carry the full weight of authority of our highest governing body. Many veterans have expressed to us their reluctance to apply for Voc-Rehab, as it is commonly referred, because they do not want to identify themselves, or be thought of, as an individual in need of “rehab.” They do not view themselves as such, but the constant association of “rehabilitation” with brokenness and need has long-lasting effects on the morale of veterans, and the perspective society adopts about veterans. This is particularly important to keep in mind when addressing the struggles of veterans in the fight against suicide or homelessness: that a veteran was killed by suicide does not reflect upon them moral failing or mental illness, and their strength should never be overlooked.

The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States believes removing “rehabilitation” from the title of this benefit removes a stigma from veterans who utilize this benefit, and will no longer enforce a paradigm of sickness or disability. We support appropriately titling this benefit to more accurately reflect both the program and participants involved.

Furthermore, EANGUS believes there are further opportunities to reform this benefit in order to better serve veteran participants:

- Provide incentives for the veteran’s Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) based upon the veteran’s completion of their postsecondary degree or education program;
- Allow veterans access to a full-time tutor at the start of their postsecondary program. Currently, a tutor is made available only when a veteran student is considered to be failing their program, at which point it is too late, though it could have been prevented;
- Consider requiring institutions and programs eligible to receive Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation payments to have policies in place for veteran students who, due to the nature of their condition, may have to withdraw in the middle of their current program. These policies should provide a framework for temporary withdrawal that does not penalize or charge the veteran student who applies, and prohibits penalizing the veteran student’s GPA or other measure of academic performance; and,
- Allow veterans access to a third party caregiver who do not have a capable caregiver family member, with such third party caregiver being subject to audit to ensure standards of care.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of this draft legislation.**

### **HR 6073 – “\$1200 Repay Draft”**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to ensure that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs repays members of the Armed Forces for certain contributions made by such members towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.*

The Department of Veterans Affairs is limited in statute in the manner in which the Department can repay servicemembers for their contributions towards Post-9/11 Education Assistance. Presently, the servicemember’s payment of \$1,200 to transfer from the Montgomery GI Bill to the Post-9/11 GI Bill is withheld by VA until the exhaustion of the servicemember’s Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit, at which point the servicemember is repaid in their final monthly housing allowance.

*HR 6073 effectively unties the Department’s hands to find another means to repay servicemembers in a more timely and efficient manner for their contributions towards Post-9/11 Educational Assistance.*

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of HR 6073 as written.**

### **HR – “Yellow Ribbon”**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to make a technical correction to clarify that colleges and universities located outside the United States may participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs.*

The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of this legislation’s technical corrections that amend language in statute so that the Department of Veterans Affairs can partner in the Yellow Ribbon Program with willing international institutions.

**The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States is supportive of this draft legislation as written**